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Russell Blackford Heinlein's Martian Named Smith

From one viewpoint, Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (first published 1961, but see also the 1991 "original uncured" version) is one of the great achievements of modern science fiction. More than four decades after its first appearance, it is clearly fixed as a classic of the genre, attracting new readers and continued critical interest. From another viewpoint, *Stranger* can be portrayed as the beginning of the end for Heinlein, the start of a decline into self-indulgence that marred a fine career.

There is truth in both viewpoints. While much of *Stranger's* apparent diffuseness can be justified in the context of that particular novel, it was the precursor of undoubtedly self-indulgent works, such as *I Will Fear No Evil* (1970), *Time Enough for Love* (1973), and *The Number of the Beast* (1980). *Stranger* itself is a very easy book to enjoy, and a relatively easy one to defend and praise. Defending the merit of works such as *I Will Fear No Evil* looks more difficult, though I'd be fascinated to see an attempt.

A full-scale defense of *Stranger* is exactly what William Patterson and Andrew Thornton provide in their book-length study, *The Martian Named Smith: Critical Perspectives on Robert A. Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land* (Sacramento: Nitrosyncratic Press, 2001; \$18.00 pb; 209 pages). Though the Patterson/Thornton book has aspects that are, to say the least, frustrating, it seems to me largely successful in explaining *Stranger's* great strengths. The key to the authors' reading, and their esthetic justification for *Stranger's* apparent diffuseness and other oddities, is their claim that it should not be read as a novel at all—but in the strict sense—but as a satire or an "anatomy." This seems to me to be clearly correct.

Leaving aside an ambiguous remark by Heinlein himself, I am not sure who first made such a claim about *Stranger*, and Patterson and Thornton do not cite any previous critical source for it. It is possible that I was the first critic to make a similar claim, though I would not be surprised if someone else preempted me. In my case, I made that point in a paper that I delivered in 1985 at that year's World Science Fiction Convention, Aussiecon 2, "The Nest of the Discopropator: or, Rereading *Stranger in a Strange Land*." It was published in the same year in the proceedings volume for the convention's academic track, *Contrivory Modes*. There I saw *Stranger* as resembling a light, Menippean, satire, and hence as not requiring a conventional novel's approach to consistent characterization:

Stranger is more like a Menippean satire than a psychological novel: its amusement lies very much in its snippets of outlandish news reports, bad verse, Socratic dialogue, fable, and philosophy.

Whether or not I was the first person to suggest this, I remain convinced that it is correct. *Stranger* has some of the characteristics of a monomyth, some of those of an encyclopedia. It has a tendency to include diverse literary and subliterary forms in a single work, held together by a loose, though clearly apparent, overall structure, together with a pattern of dominant references and images, not to mention an obsessive interest in various topics that are treated

Special Sweet Sixteen Issue

Russell Blackford Scrutinizes Patterson & Thornton's book on Heinlein
John Squires Remembers William B. Seabrook
John Clute on Charles Platt's Criticism
Greg Beatty on the first book on Thomas Ligotti
Damien Broderick on John Barnes's Duke
Rich Horton's short reviews
Plus Random Readings by David Langford, more on Wrestling by Javier Martínez, & an Editorial!

John Squires My Discovery of William B. Seabrook

In Spring 1971, I was a young draftee stationed at Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey, undergoing training on communications gear. I lived off-post with my first wife in a little town on the Jersey shore. It was an unhappy time for me in many respects, and I sometimes took walks around the town, just gathering wool. One overcast Sunday, I felt an odd compulsion to take a path out of my way across a park. The path I was on crossed another at the center of the park. As I approached the intersection, I noticed a large mesh trash can and, on impulse, glanced in it as I passed.

The can was completely empty except for a yellow hardcover book with a drawing of a black man embossed on the cover. My first wild thought was that I had discovered Robert W. Chambers's *The King in Yellow*, but on examination it was the Literary Guild reprint of *The Magic Island* by William B. (Uelker) Seabrook (1886-1945). I had never heard of either before, but felt sure the book had been left for me to find. I read it that weekend and started the hunt for Seabrook's other books.

He is usually found in the travel or occult sections. Along with a few uncollected short stories and numerous magazine articles, he wrote:

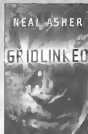
Diary of Section VIII: American Ambulance Field Service (1917). Seabrook's diary of his section of the volunteer American Ambulance service on the Verdun front in 1916.

Adventures in Arabia (1927). Primarily his experiences while living a year with a Bedouin tribe, but his chapter on visiting a temple of the Yezidee Devil Worshipers surely inspired one of Robert E. Howard's lesser stories, "The Brazen Peacock." [REH: *Lone Star Fictioneer*, 1/3, 1978, 51-60.]

The Magic Island (1929). Recounting another year spent primarily in the bush with a Voodoo priestess in Haiti. Alexander King's drawings remind me of Lee Brown Coyne at his best. Reissued as a paperback in the 1970s as *Voodoo Island*, marketed in the occult section.

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—Publishers Weekly on *The Golden Age*



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Sage Walker, Gardner Desola, & Mary Russell enjoy Armadillocon



Bruce Sterling enlightens Elizabeth & Peter Hartwell with his book at Armadillocon's Meet-the-Pro party

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My Discovery of William B. Seabrook

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Jungle Ways (1931). Proclaimed on the dust jacket as "Seabrook's Book out of Africa," notorious for Seabrook's claimed participation in a cannibal feast.

Air Adventurer: Para-Sahara-Timbuctoo (1933). An account of his early air journey from Paris to Timbuctoo, an unusual and dangerous journey at the time.

The White Monk of Timbuctoo (1934). A biography of Pere Dupuis-Yakouba.

Asylum (1935). An account of his commitment to a private asylum seeking a cure of his alcoholism.

These Foreigners (1938). Surveys of various immigrant groups in America. Versions of the various chapters appeared first in magazine form.

Witchcraft: Its Power in the World Today (1940). Not quite as it sounds and also reprinted as a paperback in the 1970s. Seabrook thought hexes could work, through the power of autosuggestion, at least as long as the victim was aware the curse had been made. Besides accounts of contemporary witches and werewolves, some of which were subsequently reprinted in fiction anthologies, he had chapters on Professor Rhane's experiments in ESP at Duke, and accounts of his own lifelong "experiments" attempting to open the doors to extrasensory perception through bondage and sensory deprivation. It includes a discussion of Aleister Crowley, whom Seabrook had befriended when he was in America.

Doctor Wood: Modern Wizard of the Laboratory (1941). A biography of American physicist Robert W. Wood of John Hopkins. It includes accounts of Wood's debunking of crank scientists and mediums, and his exploits assisting the police and FBI in crime scene investigations. Some of these could easily be reworked today into CSI scripts.

No Hiding Place (1942). A very curious autobiography.

Seabrook was born in Winchester, Maryland, on February 22, 1886. His father was a lawyer, who in 1894 abandoned law to become a preacher. Young William was raised primarily by his grandparents while his father attended seminary. His grandfather was a newspaper editor who inspired him to become a writer. Seabrook claimed his grandmother, Fanny, was a white witch, meaning she was more than a little fey. Fanny had been raised by an Obeah slave girl from Cuba and always had a sense of the otherworldly about her, though some of that could be attributed to her regular use of laudanum. He wrote that she was able to literally bring him into visions, though he wasn't sure how much she showed him was objectively real or possibly the result of a form of hypnosis. Fanny probably engendered in him his lifelong interest in the occult and alternative perceptions of reality.

After college he got a job as a reporter, then feature writer, for *The Augusta Chronicle*. Around 1907 he walked away from that and tramped around Europe. In 1908, he was sleeping on a park bench by a lake when he saw a rich young dandy drive up and escort his beautiful blonde girlfriend to sit together enjoying the view on another bench across the park. He wondered if he would ever want to have a girl like that. "I didn't know and it suddenly occurred to me that it would be a dreadful thing if I found out too late" (*No Hiding Place*, 102). So he wired his grandfather for money for a ticket on the next tramp steamer back to the States and soon was working for *The Atlanta Journal*. Because of his working knowledge of French and Italian, he was immediately assigned to cover the Metropolitan Opera's visit to Atlanta, a series which led to fast promotion at the paper. He eventually left the paper, co-founded a successful advertising agency, married a beautiful blonde, then reconnected, with his wife and business partner, the scene on the park bench. His wife reassured his partner at the time: "No, Willie's all right. He does queer things sometimes" (*No Hiding Place*, 129).

When the war came, he used that as an excuse to run away from Atlanta, volunteering for service with the American Ambulance Service in support of the French Army before America entered the war. His diary of his unit's service supporting the French defense of Verdun in 1916, though only published privately as a fund-raising tool,

became his first book. After the war he played at being a gentleman farmer, but quickly grew bored with that.

Around 1918 he moved to New York City, where he worked as a freelance writer while his first wife set up a coffeeshop in Greenwich Village, which soon became a gathering place for writers and editors. Frank Harris, then editor of the U.S. edition of *Pearson's Magazine*, introduced him to Aleister Crowley. Though Crowley was not mentioned in *No Hiding Place*, Seabrook devoted a chapter to him in *Witchcraft*, including an account of how, as an experimenter, they spent a drunken weekend speaking to each other only in an agreed monosyllable, "wow." That weekend inspired Seabrook's short story, "Wow," a fantasy of China, which was sold to H. L. Mencken and reprinted in various anthologies.

At the coffeeshop they also befriended a young Arab student who told him to be sure to look up his father, a sheik, if he ever went to North Africa. Seabrook studied Arabic, then was asked away from the coffeeshop, dropped his wife in Algiers, and spent the next year in the desert, leading to his first commercial book.

He followed a similar pattern through his next several books. After the success of *Adventures in Arabia*, he decided he wanted to study Voodoo, learned Haitian Creole, then was off to Haiti. *Magie Island* was an even bigger success than his first book and is credited with introducing the word "zombie" into the English language. Hollywood took notice, and the first of many movies on the theme, *White Zombie* (Halperin Productions, 1932), credits *Magie Island* as its inspiration.

Magie Island might have also inspired another enduring, if minor, literary legend. As was his wont, Seabrook sold articles based on his manuscript to various magazines prior to publication of the book. One of these appeared in *Callier's* on February 4, 1928, as "King Leatherneck." It told the story of a U.S. Marine sergeant, Faustir Wirkus, who was happily crowned king by the 10,000 native inhabitants of the island of La Gonave, 30 miles off Haiti. In his introduction to Wirkus's account of his adventures [The *White King of La Gonave* by Faustir Wirkus and Taney Dudley, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1931], Seabrook claimed that his account of Wirkus's kingdom was picked up and widely reported. One of the mysteries surrounding M. P. Shiel's claim to have been similarly crowned king of the island of Redonda off Montserrat in 1880 has always been why he never bothered to publicize it until the publication of his autobiographical essay, "About Myself," by Victor Gollancz in January 1929. If news of the fuss being made over Wirkus's kingdom reached him in England while he was updating his biographical notes for Gollancz in 1928, that may well be the reason he broke his long silence on the subject. A cynic might say Wirkus's tale inspired him to make the whole story up as extra publicity for the Gollancz promotional campaign. In any event, Wirkus became a celebrity and produced his own film on his adventures, *Voodoo*.

At the urging of Paul Morand, Seabrook went next to the Ivory Coast of Africa, which led to one of his most controversial books, *Jungle Ways*, and his claimed participation in a cannibal feast. To read the full story it is necessary to compare Seabrook's accounts in *Jungle Ways* and *No Hiding Place* with the account of his second wife, Marjorie Worthington, in her *The Strange World of Willie Seabrook* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966). Seabrook left Africa and settled in France with Worthington to work up his notes into the book. (They were living "in sin" at the time while their respective legal spouses were filling in love in NYC. After the divorces were obtained, their ex-spouses got married to each other. Seabrook and Worthington did too, eventually.)

Though the natives had told him he was being served human flesh as promised, Seabrook discovered he was being scammed. They had cooked an ape instead. When he got back to Paris to rework his notes into the book, he decided he had to try the real thing to accurately write about it. He arranged for a medical student to get him the raw material, then talked his way into a friend's apartment in Paris to use their kitchen. His hosts were entertaining a vegetarian couple and had a French chef who was frustrated at being unable to prepare meat dishes. Without realizing what he was working on, the chef took Seabrook into the kitchen and joyfully cooked up the meat in various ways. The vegetarian guests found the smell so enticing they wanted

to sample the dishes. Seabrook was delighted and would have let them, until the outraged Worthington intervened.

His research complete, Seabrook wrote up his account accurately describing the taste of human flesh (like "mature veal or young beef" rather than pork or chicken) but otherwise describing the setting of the jungle feast. This eventually led to reviews expressing outrage that he had participated at all, followed by humorous accounts of how he had been taken in by the natives who quickly assured the authorities back in Africa that they had only served ape. Until *No Hiding Place*, he was unable to explain that he really was writing from experience. Incredibly, one of his French society friends told him, "It is just too bad, you poor credulous little boy—and with all the trouble you took, I think you deserve to know what human flesh really tastes like, so I am giving you a dinner next week in my garden." They attended a lavish dinner party where she served her guests grilled meat, which to Seabrook tasted just like "fully developed veal or fine young baby beef. In other words, it looked and tasted exactly like human flesh" (*No Hiding Place*, 311). Only his hostess could say for sure what she served them.

Paris in the 1920s was something else, and according to their respective books Seabrook and Worthington knew and entertained at one time or another during their years in France just about all the artists and writers of the day, including the whole so-called "lost generation." On one occasion the Seabrooks had a dinner party in Paris at which a nude prostitute was suspended by chains from the living room ceiling as a decoration. The guests dutifully ignored her throughout the evening. Seabrook had a life-long ferish for women in chains and hired a succession of "Lizzies in chains," as Worthington named them, to explore that side of his nature. In *Witchcraft* he linked some of these experiences with experiments in achieving extrasensory perception through deprivation of the normal senses through restraints and masks.

In France in the early 1930s he also suffered from too much financial success after receiving a large advance on his next two books and fell heavily into the bottle instead of finishing the books. *Air Adventure* was finally delivered, but he wrote his publisher in September 1933 and asked to be committed to an asylum to be dried out before he could finish the other. Thus, they returned to New York where he was voluntarily committed to Bloomingdale Hospital in White Plains, New York. There he finally finished his biography of Pere Dupuis-Yakouba, the Catholic monk who had gone native in Timbuctoo and married a local girl before his excommunication. (Worthington claims this was his favorite book, and full of his own philosophy.)

Naturally, he wrote next of his experiences finding his cure. Serialized and widely reprinted, *Asylum* was credited with popularizing the idea that alcoholism is a disease and was probably his most famous book. Willie and Marjorie moved next to a ten-acre farm in Rhinebeck, New York, where they eventually married. He stayed sober for a while, but eventually returned to casual drinking, more "Lizzies in Chains," and when his writer's block eventually returned, more heavy drinking.

Things got worse after the publication of *Witchcraft*, which due to the subject matter, had been hard to pressell to the magazines. Worthington says he became very depressed when the idea for the next book would not come, and he went back to the bottle. He was brought out of it by another woman, Constance Kahr, who turned his sado-masochistic tendencies back on him. She ordered him to hold his elbows in a pot of boiling water until he was severely burned—literally unable to lift a glass without aid. Then she nursed him back to health while denying him alcohol. Worthington left. Kahr became his third wife, and he finished his autobiography. This cure didn't last either, and his drinking squelched his final opportunity to control his demons.

It has been said that Seabrook traveled "deeply as well as widely," and his early books were widely reprinted. Simply as travelogues they offered a wealth of detail to homebound readers, and to writers seeking local color or story ideas. Robert E. Howard recommended them to Lovecraft in a letter dated May 13, 1936, for "a realistic view of French colonial policy." In a letter to Montgomery Evans dated February 8, 1929, Arthur Machen wrote "Remember me cordially to

Seabrook: I had a very jolly lunch with him and his wife." All in all, he was a very odd but interesting fellow. He died of an overdose of sleeping pills in 1945. Shortly before that he was to have left for Europe as a war correspondent, but fell back into the bottle instead. Ward Green wrote a novel about him, *Ride the Nightmare* (1930), and there is supposed to be a chapter about him in David Malcolmson's *Tim Heron* (1941).

I mentioned Seabrook in passing once to Manly Wade Wellman, who snorted and said something to the effect that Seabrook was a thief who lifted ideas from other writers. I had not reread anything by him in 20 years or more until Paul Pipkin's "William B. Seabrook: Things Done by Shadows" in the February 2003 issue of *NTRSF* evoked a flood of memories. I have always been grateful for taking that particular forking path across the park which led me to that discarded copy of *Magic Island*, so many years ago. Perhaps I will finally track down a series of Seabrook's stories in *Vanity Fair*. Worthington wrote, "They had an Ambrose Bierce quality and contained some of his best writing" (*Strange World*, 216). Surely someone ought to dig them out again. ▶

John D. Squires lives in Kettering, Ohio.

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Heinlein's Martian Named Smith

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satirically—specifically, sex and religion. Accordingly, Patterson and Thornton are on strong ground in claiming that *Stranger in a Strange Land* is not a malformed example of a novel, rather, it is a perfectly formed example of a satire. Or, to use the other term favored by Northrop Frye in his knowingly titled *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), *Stranger* is not a novel but an "anatomy"—a satirical exploration of ideas in novelistic form.

Although Patterson and Thornton do not mention any previous critics who have argued along the same lines, they do reveal that Heinlein himself once referred to *Stranger* as "a Cabellian satire of sex and religion." Whether or not he had any deeper theoretical awareness of the tradition of Menippean satire, Heinlein was clearly influenced by James Branch Cabell, who wrote in this tradition, and his comparison with Cabell's work is exactly right. His more sympathetic readers have doubtless had an instinctive appreciation for the way in which *Stranger* works its magic, whether or not they have read Frye's account of Menippean satire, or even dipped into Cabell's satires. The book is playful, irrelevant, yet oddly gentle, and sometimes sad.

Once *Stranger* is understood in this way, many of the familiar objections to it, made by Alexei Panshin among others (see Panshin's *Heinlein in Dimension*, 1968), lose much of their force. The pleasure delivered by *Stranger* comes largely from its digressions and from its outrageous humor—much of which, as Patterson and Thornton point out, no longer seems so outrageous a few decades later. Taking pleasure in these things and the book's superficially rambling, yet structured, form does not require a theory of literature, though it does require enough sophistication to let go of traditional expectations about how a novel should be driven by plot and character as opposed to ideas and salient images.

There has evidently been little recognition of the fact that *Stranger* is best seen as an anatomy in the tradition of earlier works such as *The Satyricon*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and the fiction of Cabell. It is surprising that this was not widely recognized in the 1960s, soon after *Stranger* was published. Even sophisticated critics such as Panshin apparently lacked the kind of literary resourcefulness required to enjoy the book for what it is, at a time when other such works, such as John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1961) and *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), were fashionable, and Northrop Frye's style of literary theory had a currency that it lacks today, pushed aside by various kinds of post-structuralism and literary deconstruction.

As I remarked in my 1985 paper, *Stranger* does not require much in the way of consistent characterization in order to work effectively. It certainly does not need to take us on any convincing inner, psychological journeys, though it could not be emotionally moving—as it is—unless the main characters, especially Valentine Michael (Mike) Smith and Jubal Harshaw, were fairly engaging. That implies at least a degree of psychological consistency, since we cannot be engaged by characters who are psychologically capable of anything. Again, the overall story needs to be reasonably plausible in its own wacky terms. The fact is that *Stranger* delivers that minimal degree of consistency and plausibility, and, indeed, far more. To recognize this is not to claim that it is a perfect work of its kind, but it is far from the shambles that it is sometimes taken for.

A full defense of *Stranger*'s coherence—much of which is provided by Patterson and Thornton—would explicate Mike's roles as a kind of antithetical Jesus, bringing salvation through self-perfection rather than through submission to an external God. In the worldview of the book, God is whatever has life, or perhaps whatever has life and understanding. The effect of this is that we all have the responsibility to act as creators of our own lives and values, rather than expecting any metaphysical force or being to do it for us.

Patterson and Thornton shed light on this with a useful discussion of one of *Stranger*'s many catch-phrases: "Thou art God." They include a passage from a letter that Heinlein sent his agent, Lorton Blasingame, prior to the book's publication. This letter (published in *Grimbley from the Grass*, 1989) emphasizes responsibility for what we

do with our own lives. Heinlein calls it "an existentialist assumption of personal responsibility," showing a familiarity with the thought of French writers such as Sartre and Camus. He concludes:

What you do with yourself, whether or not you are happy or unhappy—live or die—is strictly your business and the universe doesn't care. In fact, you may be the universe and the only cause of all your troubles. But, at best, the most you can hope for is comradeship with comrades no more divine (or just as divine) as you are. So quit sniveling and face up to it—"Thou art God!"

Linked with *Stranger*'s vision of Mike as a very different kind of Christ figure, one with a "maculate origin" rather than an immaculate conception, is a portrayal of him as Prometheus, who defied the gods to bring technological power (fire) to mankind. Jubal Harshaw, the novel's Heinlein figure (though presented as much older than Heinlein actually was at the time), has other images for Mike, such as the Little Mermaid, who left her natural element to live a life of both gain and suffering.

Jubal himself resembles Socrates, rather than Christ, both in his Socratic dialogues with such characters as Ben Caxton and Duke and in an attraction to death by poison: "a cup of cheer from the hand of a friend." Thus, the two wise figures of the book, Jubal and Mike, are patterned on the greatest martyrs of antiquity, who more or less founded the Greek and Christian traditions of thought. Strangely, although they discuss Socrates at some length in other contexts, particularly when explaining the concept of irony, Patterson and Thornton don't seem to notice the resemblance between Socrates and Jubal. Nonetheless, they do provide a generally excellent account of the way *Stranger* is structured and has a unity of its own, albeit not that of a conventional psychological novel.

At times, Patterson and Thornton seem blind to *Stranger*'s genuine weaknesses, and unwilling to concede any faults at all. For example, they rather contemptuously dismiss feminist disquiet with *Stranger*, yet Heinlein's book does present its female characters in a way that tends to undercut its author's "official" belief in the competence of women and their equality with men. Whatever may have been Heinlein's intention, Jubal's three secretaries, Anne, Miriam, and Dorcas, are scarcely differentiated through much of the book, and seem interchangeable for most purposes (save for Anne's training in precise observation and recollection, as a Fair Witness). While some of the other female characters, such as Jill, Dawn, and Patty, are interesting, none of them has a presence or impact comparable to that of Mike or Jubal.

Again, the long, quasi-Socratic dialogues in which Jubal expounds his cultural, esthetic, and sexual theories are sometimes heavy-headed and pompous, even for a Menippean satire with its inevitable tendency to grow into a kind of encyclopedia, displaying delight in goblets of all sorts. *Stranger*'s elitist morality, in which a secular Elect are permitted to judge others as "better dead," is oddly attractive, but all the more worrying for that. The book's metaphorical valorization of (heterosexual) sex is simply over-the-top, even while its pro-sex attitudes and rejection of sexual guilt and jealousy remain refreshing, more than forty years after it was first published. The authors of *The Martian Named Smith* are unwilling to recognize problems with any of this.

In addition to its blindness to anything faulty or problematic in *Stranger*, *The Martian Named Smith* is untrifling in various other ways. It is often pompous, pedantic, and difficult to read, while its interpretations are sometimes far-fetched or contrived.

One problem is its long, expository footnotes. For example, the authors offer a footnoted explanation of their quasi-Biblical usage of the words "innocence and experience," which runs to approximately 120 words. Another long footnote, well over two hundred words, attempts to argue the case that Jesus may be essentially a fictional character. Yet, despite Patterson and Thornton's attempt to make something of this for the purpose of interpreting *Stranger*, the history of Jesus actually makes no real difference to our understanding of Heinlein's book. Still another footnote discusses Korzybski at a point well after the initial discussion of Korzybski's influence on Heinlein. This particular note is

nearly one hundred claims long, and its substance should have been introduced much earlier.

These are not isolated examples. Such lengthy expository notes appear all the way through, making *The Martian Named Smith* extremely difficult to read. Surely, most of the material could have been integrated into the body of the text, to the extent that it is really necessary. If it is not necessary, it could have been left out.

In addition to this particular problem with the notes, the text is often too discursive, with much material that is of dubious relevance. For example, three pages are spent introducing the concept of irony, with several unnecessary digressions, such as an account of the technique of the *zen koan*—which has nothing to do with Heinlein's technique so far as I can see. There is a somewhat lengthy discussion of *The Gospel of Thomas*, presented for the fact that it refers to the drinking of water as a religious rite. Yet, as the authors themselves note, it is not clear that Heinlein read *The Gospel of Thomas* before finishing *Stranger* (nor is it clear what difference this would make). The legitimate claim that can be made here is simply that the sharing of water in *Stranger* is a plausible rite, but that hardly needs much arguing or any Herculean efforts at scholarship.

Overall, an impression is created that the authors do not wish even one point to get away from them, however dubious or marginal its value for illuminating Heinlein's work, or for illustrating concepts that they feel they must explain, such as irony. All in all, *The Martian Named Smith* shows a lack of selectivity—which might be appropriate in a Menopausal satire, but is frustrating and distracting in a critical work of this kind.

The laborious explanations of well-known concepts such as irony and of marginally relevant background issues, together with the apparatus of further reading and questions for discussion set out at the end of each chapter, seem to suggest that *The Martian Named Smith* has been packaged as a text for senior high school or junior college students. Given the amount of material in the book, it is not apparent that it could be used in that way, unless a detailed academic program were built around *Stranger*. That said, if *Stranger* were taught in a course of study at this level, the Patterson and Thornton book would be an invaluable resource for both the teacher and the students.

Even then, it would need to be used carefully. In at least one area, its scholarship is dubious: there is a confused account of "Positivist Materialism" in a chapter on esthetics that attempts to place *Stranger* in the context of literary Modernism and the cultural changes that surrounded it. Even reading this account as sympathetically as I can, I am unable to match what the authors say against my own grasp of tendencies in Western philosophy and art in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Patterson and Thornton's discussion of Comte and the logical positivists (none of whom are mentioned individually) is so tendentious and wrongheaded that it is better avoided altogether. As far as I can tell, the rest of the book's scholarship is reliable, but this example casts doubt on its credibility in other areas where my own scholarly knowledge is not sufficient for me to be sure.

More generally, there is a kind of wrongheaded over-enthusiasm in many of the book's interpretations. At numerous stages of the discussion, the interpretations offered seem to be tenuous, contrived, or simply insensitive to Heinlein's nuances of tone. For example, Patterson and Thornton offer an extremely detailed account of the attitudes to sex revealed in the history of Western culture and compare them to those depicted in *Stranger*. While none of their discussion is clearly absurd, it does often seem insensitive to the main point, that *Stranger* holds up conventional views of sexual love based on guilt, mystery, and jealousy as objects of satire.

Patterson and Thornton are, of course, quite correct that the arrangements of Mike's Nest—with free love among water brothers, but the total exclusion of outsiders—are not intended as a literal social blueprint. Rather, we are left to make up our own minds as to how the unsatisfactory arrangements in our society could be improved upon. Still, every character in *Stranger* who is given any degree of credibility is shown as rejecting the ideal of monogamy, and the overall sense given is that the Nest would be an improvement, even if it could not be adopted *holus bolus* in the absence of a miracle worker such as Mike. *Stranger's* social direction is clear enough in this respect, but Patterson and Thornton tend to obscure it with their discussion of the

various currents in Western thinking about sex, and their apparent unwillingness to say straight out that *Stranger* mocks and critiques the social ideal of monogamy.

A more specific example of wrongheadedness relates to a passage in *Stranger* where we are told that one Martian artist disincorporated (i.e., died) while in the middle of composing a work that was so engrossing that he failed to notice his own death and simply continued. Thus, the work was partly created by a corporeal adult Martian, partly by a disincorporated Old One. Since the Martian culture has artistic categories appropriate to nymphs, adults, and Old Ones, this incident violated those categories and the Martians' normal canons of interpretation, creating an esthetic controversy likely to last for hundreds of years and to delay any decision by the Martians about whether to destroy the Earth.

Patterson and Thornton argue that the reference to this disincorporated artist is to Heinlein himself, though they presumably mean that Heinlein was in an analogous situation rather than that *Stranger* self-referentially purports to be itself the work that produced the controversy on Mars. After all, Heinlein was human, not Martian, and was very much alive when *Stranger* was completed. The analogy supposedly lies in the fact that Heinlein was in "vigorous middle age" at forty-two when he commenced writing *Stranger*, but an Old One or something like it—"on the verge of elderliness"—when the book was completed and published in 1961. At that stage, he was "in his mid-fifties." The incident described in *Stranger* is interpreted by Patterson and Thornton as a humorous acknowledgment by Heinlein, at the time of writing, that *Stranger* would itself be difficult for its readers to evaluate.

Well, perhaps. It would be bold to suggest that no such comparison ever crossed Heinlein's mind as he worked on *Stranger* on and off for over a decade. For all that, it is a very tenuous point. Heinlein was about fifty-three when he completed *Stranger*, not all that different from forty-two, and not an age—even forty years ago—that could be analogized to death (the Martian Old Ones are, in effect, ghosts). If the analogy were made humorously, and suggested as one that might or might not have occurred to Heinlein himself, this would all be acceptable, a neat little joke. Instead, it is offered as a serious interpretation, that the meaning of the incident is that *Stranger* will be misunderstood. Unfortunately, one tenuous point is being built on another here in a way that is undoubtedly clever, but ultimately unconvincing.

There is a similar kind of unconvincing cleverness when Patterson and Thornton find references to neoplatonic thought in *Stranger*, refer to St. Augustine as having been influenced by neoplatonic thought, and then suggest that Heinlein is thus using the foundations of modern Christianity to satirize religion. This is again building one tenuous point on another. In fact, *Stranger* uses ideas from philosophy and theology with a light, adroit touch, Heinlein clearly being highly literate in these ideas (perhaps partly via Ouspensky, as Patterson and Thornton argue convincingly). Attempts to schematize Heinlein's use of philosophical and theological ideas, and to seek hidden meanings, simply do not do him justice.

A more humorous example of the urge to find hidden meanings can be found in the discussion of the names of Jubal's three secretaries, Anne, Miriam, and Dorcas—"It is possible that they hold the master key for interpreting the entire book." It is true that *Stranger* displays a great deal of play with its characters' names, starting with the richly significant name "Valentine Michael Smith" for its main character. This is a critical truism by now, and Jubal is even presented within the book agonizing over the meanings of names given by other characters to their children. Heinlein has thus made it totally clear within *Stranger* itself that names are likely to be significant.

At the same time, there has to be an end to the search for hidden meanings. *Stranger* is a work of entertainment, not a message in secret code. Whatever meanings are ascribed to the names "Anne," "Miriam," and "Dorcas" (and there is no shortage of possibilities), this cannot change the overall significance of the book, which is clearly satirical, with the objects of the satire—institutionalized religion, conventional ideals about sex, and moral parochialism in general—clearly identified. Any particular significance read into various names must inevitably be controlled by the context of the book as a whole:

its structure, subject matter, and tone. It is misguided to seek, or even contemplate the possibility of, a hidden "master key."

The Martian Nomenclature provides an impressive defense of *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and is an important scholarly resource. Now that it is available, it cannot be overlooked by any student of Heinlein's work. However, much of its overenthusiastic scholarship and critical interpretation does not really illuminate *Stranger*. Readers of *The Martian Nomenclature* will need to be selective as to what information they need to discard, and what is genuinely helpful for an understanding of Heinlein's great, if flawed, Martian opus. Still, it

takes a certain narrowness of literary sensibility not to enjoy *Stranger*. At the very least, it is a delightful satiric romp. By treating *Stranger* as a Menippean satire and exploring the learning that lies behind it, Patterson and Thornton provide a convincing defense of the book and illuminate much of the way that it works. At the same time, they provide much useful background information on the book's history and Heinlein's sources. No one who takes Heinlein and *Stranger* seriously should ignore this study. ►

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The Atrocity Archive by Charles Stross

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reviewed by Jim Mann

There is a subgenre of fantasy and science fiction, dominated by Tim Powers over the last decade, which we might refer to as "secret histories." The books often center around events in our own world, often historical events, and feature historical characters. But the books involve these characters in supernatural plots, and at times the actual historical events are explained by this supernatural story. In Powers's *Expiration Date*, Thomas Edison and Harry Houdini feature prominently, and some of the actions in their lives are explained in terms of supernatural events involving characters who capture and consume ghosts. Similarly, in Powers's most recent novel, *Declare*, events ranging from the defection of double agent Kim Philby to pivotal points in the Cold War are explained by the hidden supernatural conflict between superpowers. Picture, if you will, a John Le Carré novel in which the characters are involved with the search for Noah's Ark, the Soviets plant a djinn in Berlin, and the quick fall of the Soviet Union and of the Berlin Wall are due to events in this supernatural Cold War. The historical events and characters ground the stories, giving them a basis in reality that makes them believable while we read the stories, despite the strange events that intrude into them. In fact, this base reality, contrasted with the supernatural events that take place, creates a real sense of wonder.

Recently, other authors have ventured into the territory that Powers has dominated for so long. Alex Irvine's wonderful first novel, *A Scattering of Jades*, was one such effort involving Aztec gods, Aaron Burr, and others in a conspiracy in nineteenth-century America. Charles Stross's first novel, *The Atrocity Archive*, recently serialized in the fine British paperback sf magazine *Spectrum* SF, is another.

Stross has written numerous short stories over the last couple of years, and is probably best known for the near future stories set in a technology-rich, cyberpunk future, such as "Lobsters" and "Tourist." *The Atrocity Archive* is quite different from these stories, though it shares their hacker-wise mentality. The novel is set on an earth in which certain types of information theory can allow breakthroughs from other universes into our own. These arcane creatures can at times break through physically, but often reach through to take possession of humans in our universe. All of this is explained in a marvelous technojargon, which is a mixture of math, information theory, physics, and the language of H. P. Lovecraft. The major countries of the world all have secret services whose job it is to prevent anyone from discovering and publishing papers about the wrong types of information theory and to deal with any incursions that do happen. After all, a paper that revealed the forbidden information could result in an apocalypse.

The novel's main character is Bob Howard, a math and computer science type who was about to publish a paper on the forbidden topics and was therefore given the choice of either coming to work for the Laundry (the British secret service who are responsible for dealing with the supernatural) or being eliminated by that same service. (The Laundry has learned something in the years since they assassinated Turing before he could publish the Lovelace/Turing theorem, thereby losing someone who could have been an important asset for them.) Howard is a basic geek who, as the novel starts, is spending most of his time in computer administration and in dealing with the Laundry's bureaucracy.

As the novel progresses, Howard is flung into field work, first rescuing Mo, an American mathematician, whom Middle Eastern

terrorists are bent on using in creating an inter-dimensional incursion, then helping to uncover what appears to be a plot by the remnants of the Nazi Ahenneber-SS, the German organization that, at the end of World War II, almost succeeded in launching a major supernatural assault that could have won the war. The Ahenneber-SS had been essentially wiped out by the Allies, who had agreed to completely eliminate them and to limit their own use of supernatural weapons. (Even Stalin had seen the danger, both in using the weapons and in what they would cost to use, which could include human sacrifice on a grotesquely grand scale.)

The novel does a fine job of balancing humor with moments of real horror. Stross's view of the British bureaucracy is unlike anything in Powers, and there are also some fine moments with Howard's roommates, Pinky and Brains, as well as a number of amusing insider computer jokes. At the same time, the unfolding history, dealing with the Holocaust and its relationship to the Nazi attempt to unleash a supernatural weapon of world conquest, is unsettling. The novel moves deftly from light and humorous to dark and disturbing.

Beneath the fantastic elements and beneath the humor is a realism that grounds the novel. This sense of reality is threefold. First, it comes from the use of real history; Stross, like Powers, uses historical events and characters. Second is Stross's use of the concepts and characters of computer science, which again connects his world to our own. Finally, we have what, at least on a surface level, is some degree of scientific explanation of what goes on—something that, in the end, makes the novel an interesting blend of sf and cosmic horror in the Lovecraftian tradition. Stross knows at least enough of the concepts of modern physics and astrophysics to give the novel a firm basis.

A key strength of the book is Stross's ability to merge the worlds of the technology geeks and that of Lovecraftian horror, seasoned with splashes of hard sf, Powersian secret history, and *The X-Files*. Stross, a computer geek and a writer of computer books, has a deep understanding of both the equipment and the culture of the world of high technology. This is a world in which books on the occult aspects of computing sit on the bookshelf next to the (infamously unpublished) fourth volume of Knuth's classic series on algorithms. His characters speak and act like those in the high-tech world (if at times—as in the cases of Pinky and Brains—at the extreme end of that world) and know the jargon, the technology, and the props of that world.

Stross also understands the British bureaucracy, which, at its worst, is more entrenched, more bound by often-silly rules, and more humorous than its American counterpart—at least from the point of view of an outsider not trapped in it and being reprimanded for not filling out the appropriate paperwork before taking action to prevent a catastrophe. But Stross clearly knows this bureaucracy, and his ability to convey this knowledge again adds to the fundamental verisimilitude that helps us to suspend disbelief in the fantastic elements of the novel.

All of this is told at a pace that keeps you turning the pages. The characters are, if somewhat eccentric, also convincing. There will be a book version soon from Golden Gryphon, and I hope Stross expands it at least a bit. The novel, while quite good in its current form, would be even better with a few more details fleshed out. This is a fine debut novel by Stross. ►

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The Duke of Uranium by John Barnes
New York: Warner Books, 2002; \$6.99 pb; 290 pages
reviewed by Damien Broderick

In 1999, reviewing John Barnes's novel *Finisbyhere*, I commented that he is today's equivalent of those reliable craftsfolk at the end of the Campbellian Golden Age: an entertainer with ambitions beyond genre restrictions but happy to work within their boundaries, schooled in the elements of the sciences and prepared to do the hard slogging needed to get it right within the limits of the game, blessed as well with an edge of humor and that mysterious, bubbling imagination which flows across the terrain of formula and renews it, if only for a moment, while leaving it formulaic. That remains apt for his new sequence, begun with this short more-or-less Young Adult solar system adventure (currently three books in the stores). It's the sort of YA novel in which protagonist Jak Jinnaka's school has "championships in six sports," as expected, but also "one viv program rated stars 'most promiscuous,'" and there's some diverting sex along the way.

I was sent only the first volume, and if I felt more enthusiastic, I'd have insisted on the others before offering a review. That doesn't mean you won't enjoy it, but it does risk damning with faint praise. I'd still far prefer to see something as ambitious as Barnes's *Mother of Storms*, but the man has to make a living. The readers who thrill to the wildly inapposite cover art will still like the book enough to buy the rest.

That cover shows a firm-mouthed young space officer in some sort of snug orbital Napoleonic outfit gazing across our shoulders while a man and a long-haired woman similarly garbed wait in a spacecraft explodes high above the Earth. (Actually that character is in the exploding ship when that happens, being pestered by the stupid automatic recovery system.) It implies that this is one of those military space adventures with the word Honor in the title or the text. In fact, though, hilariously, here is how these bad boy toves—from *tovrich*, presumably—really get about in their "dash-splash-and-smash" couture:

He had chosen to wear his new singlet with spirals of nonfunctional buttons over his zebra-print coverall, with lace-up red gripslippers with grown-lizard soles. Over the singlet he wore his lavender cutaway with big, droopy, double-rolled sleeves, popular that year at the Academy and just starting to spread down to gen school. . . . unattached collar and bowler hat completed the look. (40)

I don't know about you, but while I wouldn't be seen dead reading one of the numerous books with Honor in it, this is rather a hoot and encouraged me to press on. Barnes's inventive future kid patois, too, is entertaining. For emphasis, you use "toktru" ("talk true," a self-

explanatory borrowing from Papean pidgin), and to emphasize the emphasis add in "singing-on," which eludes me, but maybe the implied fossilized metaphor is one of those arbitrary and contingent facts that screw up any theory of history, even the rather elaborate one embodied in this sequence at considerable dactylumping but always entertaining length. The solar sailing ship young Jak spends a fair bit of time on is named *Spirit of Singing Port*, but that might be coincidental. You will need to keep your secret decoder ring hard at work as you read these little books. "Speck" is, maybe, "speculate-extrapolate." "Dak" obviously means grok-in fullness, but I can't see the derivation. "Feets" and "heet" I'm feeling thick and stupid.

So is Jak for most of the book, which is useful because people can take the opportunity to set him straight, to our mutual benefit. It's handled gracefully, after the famous fashion of Heinlein, who, as with many of Barnes's earlier works, is the *online* *begetter*. Two YA Heinleins from the 1950s find frequent echoes here: *Between Planets*, where the kid does derring do under the tutelage of his gruff, secretly politically potent uncle, and *Starship Troopers*, where the kid is shocked into growing up and being a man and like that, until at last his feckless wealthy father enters his command as a grant in one of those terrific Oedipal turns Heinlein specialized in.

That doesn't happen here, but there are volumes more before Jak comes into his kingdom, foreshadowed in the grumpy one-century-later ruminations of his high school teacher. Here, the teachings are not those of warrior citizens but rather an amusingly Vonnegutian mishmash (like a parody of the wit and wisdom of Lazarus Long), the Two Hundred and Thirty Four Principles of Nakasen that underlie the Wager. Here's Number 118: Forgiveness costs nothing, and saves energy. Number 115 advises: If you stumble often, watch your feet, and look for patient friends. And in a parody of Frank Herbert, there's the Short Litany of Terror, that starts: "Death happens, anyway." We can see that poor Jak and his friends will have ample opportunity to invoke this bracing doctrine.

The solar system in the thirty-sixth century ("fifteen hundred years of spaceflight") is pretty crowded, with artificial worlds at Earth's L4 and L5 libration points, the Aerle and the Hive. Gossamer spaceships fly great looping trajectories between these worlds, picking up and depositing cargo and raw materials in scary grazing tangents. At the boundary, Pluto and its moon Charon are home to the last of the alien Rubahy, who somewhat resemble fearsome, intelligent terriers and live by mysterious social rules. A long time back, these aliens slapped Earth for months with relativistic impact bombs,

Richard Horton
John Barnes's *A Princess of the Aerle*

Last year I was quite taken with John Barnes's novel *The Duke of Uranium*, a romp set in an well-inhabited thirty-sixth-century Solar System. That novel introduced Jak Jinnaka, a charismatic young man who, it is hinted, will achieve great (and perhaps sinister) power later in his life. Barnes seemed to deliberately sprinkle that book with references to Heinlein, and in many ways it read like a present-day Heinlein juvenile. But Barnes, identifiably has different things in mind, and the sequel, *A Princess of the Aerle* (New York: Warner Aspect, 2003; \$6.99 pb; 321 pages), is certainly not a Young Adult book. It is, however, an interesting and very enjoyable read, set in a politically and technologically fascinating future.

Jak's former girlfriend, Shyl, was revealed in the first book to be a princess of a nation in the Aerle, a cluster of space habitats located at the Earth-Sun L4 point. Jak lives in the Hive, at the L5 point, and he's studying at the Public Service Academy, with his friend Dujuv, a young man with panther-derived genes. Jak is looking for a class project, and at the same time he gets a message

from Shyl, asking him for help and hinting at a resumption of their relationship. So Jak, Dujuv, and Dujuv's ex-girlfriend Myscena head for the Aerle. Once there, however, they find that Shyl claims not to have sent any such message. They also learn that Shyl is not the person they thought she was; instead she is a sex-mad, power-mad, spoiled brat. But Jak and his friends, partly because of what seems to be unusual luck on Jak's part, foil an attempt on the princess's father's life. As a reward, they are sent to the bellish mines of Mercury, where they get involved with a revolution against a group angling to take control of Mercury's resources.

The story is exciting in itself, and furthermore it is fascinating in its cynical view of *realpolitik* as it applies to the thirty-sixth century. Our view of Jak is complicated enormously in this second of his adventures: it's clear that he's not quite what he seems, but it's also clear that his friends (and former friends) don't understand him well either. I'm looking forward to further stories detailing the career of Jak Jinnaka—and I do want to see what he makes of his life and times. ▶

cratering the surface of whatever parts of the planet were in line of sight for half a century. Today, these craters are filled with water, beautiful jewels bringing life to the deserts. The enemy world around Alpha Draconis came off extremely worse, baked by an induced sun flare, so the terraces on Pluto are like the Japanese soldiers left in Papuan jungles would have been if the Allies had actually nuked the whole of the Home Islands to smithereens, now settled down to making transistor radios and perhaps hatching strange plots.

Jak, from the Hive, is a young lout with odd but forbearing elders. His pal Dujve is a panth, generically engineered for strength and agility, but not notable intelligence. His aim is to play space soccer or something, but their mediocre PSA scores leave them few choices. With their girlfriends or demmies, beautiful and without evident ambition, they attend a slec concert played by that cool band Y4UB, and lovely Sesh is kidnapped despite hetoes by the boys. Jak is mildly killed, his demmy snatched, and it turns out she's not the airhead everyone assumed, but actually—

And so it goes, pleasantly, full of inventive turns on life in space without too much change unpredictable in 1950, a little like Varley's *Eight Worlds* or Greenland's *Plenty*. Economics and its sociocultural consequences get more of a look than usual in space opera, as expected, because that's one of Barnes's specialties, but in this quasi-YA format, it's inevitably schematic and faintly ludicrous, as in the title. The heir to the throne of uranium—"a creepy little man"—is behind the snatching of Sesh. His name is Pukh, so I guess his parents knew how he'd turn out. But is he *really* the heir? Then, who is this mysterious dark stranger, Shadow, with powerful loyal associates who bust them all out of—

But I must not spoil the surprises. You know, I've got myself interested again. Maybe I'll go and get hold of those sequels after all. For a rainy day. ►

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The Rain Is Full of Ghosts by Zoë Landale
Edmonton, Alberta: Tesseract Books, 2000; \$16.95 tpb; 244 pages
reviewed by L. Timmel Duchamp

Fantasy, for many, is nearly synonymous with the pleasure of escape. And yet fantasy writers often deploy the genre's recognizable tropes and elements as the means their protagonists use to perform serious emotional work, work like grieving and healing.

Zoë Landale's *The Rain Is Full of Ghosts* opens with a scene of crisis for its protagonist, Ingeborg, in which the key to the novel's fantasy dimension, a Canada goose the narrative calls "the Family Ghost," makes its first appearance. This fantastic creature, we immediately learn, is embodied; it "waggles its bottom, deposits a slimy turd on [Ingeborg's] immaculate porch," causing Ingeborg to scold, "For an angel, or whatever, you're an awful messy creature" (1). Ingeborg chafes against the Family Ghost's goose-ness—against its demands for food (and, indeed, its preferences for the most expensive bird seed), its attention to its feathers, and its habit of careless defecation.

A goose, of course, is a bird, as the narrative emphasizes through Ingeborg's constant effort to see more of the trajectory of the Family Ghost's flight than its take-offs and landings. In several fairy-tale traditions, birds play special roles, ranging from incarnating the souls of (dead) human beings, to delivering helpful or warning messages (often from "beyond"), to meting out vengeance. Ingeborg tends to regard her goose as an emissary from her dead family members. And the Family Ghost from page one acts as Ingeborg's confidant and moral conscience. Landale skillfully plays out the revelation of the Family Ghost's place in the narrative's cosmic reality, making the reader's interest in piecing together the novel's fantasy logic a powerful force driving the narrative.

Ingeborg's first conversations with the Family Ghost concern Ingeborg's unintended pregnancy, which she longs to carry to term, but her boyfriend Tony insists she terminate. Deeply torn, she chooses her life with Tony over the pregnancy. She and Tony have been a working team as well as a couple. They have shared a home, and they have shared the work on Tony's fishing boat. In the wake of the abortion, an angry and resentful Ingeborg realizes that Tony took her (unpaid) labor as crew for granted (a "natural" perk, as it were, of their personal relationship), but has interest in protecting his sole ownership of the boat precludes, in his mind, the possibility of their ever raising children. While she had perceived herself as working with Tony to advance their shared interests as a couple, Tony had been regarding himself as the sole proprietor of a business generously supporting his girlfriend. Her anger drives her to leave Tony—demanding a portion of what she now regards as back pay—and return to cowering on other fishing boats.

Although Ingeborg has an I.U.D. inserted immediately after the abortion to please Tony, she nevertheless gets pregnant the very next time she has sex. The father is not Tony, but Pete, who is married and has two boys. When she bears the child, Pete hears from the labor nurse that he is the father and re-enters her life, and the two of them awkwardly work to make themselves and the three children a family.

Throughout, Ingeborg talks privately to the Family Ghost, which ceaselessly asks her questions intended to help her think about who she is and what she is doing. As an immigrant (Danish, of a highly educated family) living among working class Vancouver Islanders, she is often caught up in misunderstandings or conflicts due primarily to the difference in her cultural and moral values. Since her life tends to be difficult and complicated, her temper short, and her immediate emotional responses unfunking, this aspect of her relationship with the Family Ghost seems obviously rooted in Ingeborg's immediate present. And yet the Family Ghost's most important function is to help Ingeborg recollect the family she has left behind, both in memory and in flesh.

Significantly, the key to her trauma lies in a special talent she shares with her father. The Family Ghost facilitates the recovery by taking Ingeborg into landscapes beyond the mundane world. If this is a private fantasy in the sense that only she can perceive and experience it, it is a fantasy of work, not pleasure, with nothing self-indulgent or solipsistic about it.

Ingeborg is an ordinary human being whose only fantasy-related task is to heal herself. While some readers might find such a use of fantasy too quiet and limited, the exceptional attention to social and physical detail in the narrative and the psychological complexity of its protagonist makes this a far from ordinary novel. The gritty depiction of small-boat fishing off Vancouver Island in the 1970s is detailed with the exactitude with which work is described in fine science fiction and is so sensually evocative that readers will vividly experience the sounds, smells, and sensations of Ingeborg's working life. Moreover, the novel so deftly renders both the Vancouver Islanders' and the Danish-accented Ingeborg's speech rhythms that, as I read, I placed their voices as distinctive and local (rather than the usual generic). But the novel's subtle attention to the conditions and discourse of its setting's social and economic structures impressed me most.

Ingeborg engages me deeply as a character, so deeply, in fact, as to have given me the first glimmers of insight into the baffling, often exasperating young women I've known who've behaved as she does. But my engagement with such a protagonist hinges on the narrative's intricate embedding of the character in a life of work, conflict, and a complicated economic and social milieu. Her healing may be a prerequisite for her making the kind of life she so desperately wishes to create, yet is necessarily interwoven with the immanent details of that life. Healing, the novel seems to be saying, is not a matter of transcendence.

The best fantasy works fall beneath the narrative surface. And so it is with *The Rain Is Full of Ghosts*, with the emphasis definitely on *work*. This is a novel well worth the reader's effort. ►

L. Timmel Duchamp lives in Seattle, Washington.

Evolution by Stephen Baxter

New York: Del Rey, February 2003; \$25.95 hc; 578 pages

reviewed by Robert J. Sawyer

In *Evolution*, Stephen Baxter does nothing less than take us on a journey from the dawn of primate life to the far, far posthuman future. The obvious comparison is to Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, but I was also reminded of the final section of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (not surprising, given that Baxter previously wrote a wonderful sequel to it, *The Time Ships*). *Evolution* is an ambitious novel and a very important work.

And yet, I have reservations. Any competent hard-of-writer could have written most of *Evolution*; there's nothing spectacular in the telling of the bulk of the story. Indeed, there are enough rough sentences that it's clear the book could have used one more pass through the word processor. And there are a few errors. A character who doesn't know what date it is puts enormous stock in the fact that Mars can't be seen in the night sky—there's nothing abnormal about that; Mars is often in the daytime sky, and therefore invisible. Baxter makes up names for future geological epochs, "Neocene" and "Ullitene," which he translates as the ages of "new life" and "last life," respectively. The suffix "-cene" actually means "recent," not "life," so his future ages are really the puzzling "new recent" and "last recent" eras.

Of course, these are quibbles. More significant for whether any given reader will like or dislike this remarkable book is Baxter's decision to eschew almost any notion of plot or character—a bold move. Although there's a slim framing story involving an African-American paleoanthropologist (almost a cliché of the field, seen— with a defter touch, I must say—in such other books as Roger MacBride Allen's *Orphan of Creation*), the bulk of *Evolution* is a collection of vignettes told from the points of view of representative members of various primate genera. Baxter starts with the very first primate, *Purgatorius*, whose existence supposedly just overlapped with the end of the dinosaurs.

Actually, most paleontologists really consider *Purgatorius* as coming from the Paleocene, the first epoch after the demise of the dinosaurs, but if writers—myself among them—have latched on to

one contested tooth that might make *Purgatorius* contemporaneous with the last of the great saurians. The idea of having a primate brain looking out on the death of the dinosaurs is irresistible, of course, and Baxter uses it to great effect. (As an amusing aside, I note that Baxter's choice to begin the story with *Purgatorius* leads to the bizarre Library of Congress cataloging of the book as "Montana—Fiction," since that's where *Purgatorius* fossils come from.)

Most of Baxter's vignettes—underscoring that life has always been nasty, brutish, and short—really aren't science fiction. They're largely indistinguishable from the narrative reconstructions of the lives of extinct animals that fill so many pages in pop-sci nonfiction such as Dale A. Russell's classic *An Odyssey in Time: The Dinosaurs of North America*. Indeed, it's not insignificant that Baxter chose to subtitle his book *A Novel*, since there really is some question on that score.

In another bold, and I think wonderfully successful, move, Baxter shows how insignificant the species *Homo sapiens* is by dispensing with all of its history in one brief episode, set during the declining days of the Roman Empire.

Only in a very few places in the first two-thirds of the book does Baxter indulge in his signature big-ideas speculation, giving us brief glimpses of a giant airwhale and of tool-using dinosaurs, both of which sadly escaped being recorded in the fossil record.

But the Baxter readers know and love arrives in full force in the book's last hundred pages, giving us a *tour de force* of future world-building. His vision of post-humans living in a bizarre symbiosis with the sentient trees they have returned to is as haunting an image as any to be found in science fiction.

Evolution will be discussed as much for Baxter's creative choices as for its sweeping (and quite bleak) view of the history of life, but either way you choose to look at it, it's a fascinating book. ▶

Robert J. Sawyer is Writer-in-Residence at Toronto's Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation, and Fantasy.

Dragon and Thief by Timothy Zahn

New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$24.95 hc; 256 pages

reviewed by Donald M. Hassler

Both the commercial blurbs and the early scholarly accounts of Timothy Zahn's work say repeatedly that he aims to entertain. None of his more than twenty books to date exemplify so well the classic literary goal of linking message to pleasure as does this short novel, which begins a new series, *The Dragonback Adventures*. This is a wonderful little story, well-told and with a fine cast of characters, that resonates with meaning. Let me miss the point, this carnivalesque entertainment principle is stated self-consciously and explicitly by Zahn when his two heroes must perform a juggling act to distract their enemies, "keeping an audience on the hook."

Once the reader is hooked, Zahn underpins his text with serious speculation on character, behavior, and physics. But here, his solemn musings on friendship and a "warrior ethic" take precedence over string theory or wormholes, even though the older of his two heroes is quite literally two-dimensional at times. However, the latter statement pertains only to the physics in the anatomy of the character, not to his fictional characterization, although Zahn may be laughing at his own technique here. The narrative itself is not narrow and two-dimensional, but is skillfully fleshed out.

The story brings together two boys, lost in space, who bravely, and with humor, learn how valuable it is to have a partner in crime as well as to do "the right thing" according to the "K'da warrior ethic." The two heroes are like the Hardy boys, although one is a sometimes two-dimensional dragon from a distant galaxy.

The reader first meets Draycos, the dragon, as he struggles with his partner, a symbiotic Shontine, to control their starship, which is under vicious attack by the mysterious Valahua, who use strange and

terrible weapons. The evil enemy wins this initial battle, and Draycos crash-lands on a planet near Earth. His symbiont dies in the crash, leaving Draycos only six hours to live. Individuals of his species, the K'da, must have a symbiont or they evaporate, leaving no residue. Also, with a host, they can live in a two-dimensional state, weightless and thinner than a film, a real magic trick of physics in itself. Fortunately, Draycos discovers another lost soul on this desolate planet, not a Shontine but a friendly enough partner.

The new symbiosis works out, so the friendly and noble dragon, far from his home, may live to fight again. But Zahn puts the fight with the Valahua in the background for development in a sequel so that the reader, and Draycos, may get to know his new symbiont, Jack Morgan. Jack has been orphaned at fourteen, but is coping well. After the death of his parents, he was brought up by his Uncle Virgil, a trickster and juggler who taught Jack to run confidence games and to crack safes. Uncle Virgil has recently died in an accident, but he and Jack embedded his personality into software so Jack is already accustomed to alleviating his loneliness with virtual reality. Jack is the young thief of the title.

He and Draycos are getting to know each other when new challenges in the plot force the process and permit both of them (as well as the reader) to witness and admire each other's skills, resourcefulness, and trickiness. They become a good team, outwitting thugs and evildoers, by the end of the book. Then they can pause and wait, with the reader, to see what will happen with the Valahua in the sequel.

Zahn's characterization is nicely grounded in amusing physical, as well as moral, traits. The K'da eat motor oil and hamburger, and when

Draycos rises to his warrior mode, his blood runs crankcase black. A dead K'da warrior leaves no sludge, once he has lost his symbiont, he fades from two-dimensionality to nothingness. The K'da warrior ethic is Spocklike in rational morality. Strangely, the K'da remind me of the angels in *Paradise Lost*. Conversely, Jack is a very clever human trickster and magician, but willing to learn a higher morality from his new partner. The idea of symbiosis echoes widely from the human-machine symbiosis in which Jack initially partakes, to the later soul symbiosis when Draycos shrinks to two dimensions as a part of Jack.

Zahn tells this little adventure story as a juvenile which follows the exploits of young heroes and intelligent petlike dragons, but seasoned old people like myself can marvel at its symbiosis of hard sf and fantasy.

Zahn manages to tease the young person out of all of us, which may be what sf does best. A classic hard sf novel from years ago by Hal Clement, *Cycle of Fire* (1957), based on a symbiosis of species, makes use of a fairly young hero like Jack (who is not part of the symbiosis except for the fact that Clement folds him nicely into the story and into the environment), and then extrapolates wonderfully on very adult themes such as death, reincarnation, and immortality. With this story and these characters, Zahn enters the league of Hal Clement as a writer of hard sf with a full bag of tricks. I look forward to more of the Dragonback Adventures. ▶

Donald Hassler lives in Kent, Ohio.

Snare by Katherine Kerr

New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$27.95 hc; 592 pages

reviewed by Matthew Appleton

One of the primary definitions of the word "snare" in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is "something by which one is entangled, involved in difficulties, or impeded." With that in mind, I couldn't help but wonder if Katherine Kerr was attempting some sort of bold statement with the name of her most recent novel, *Snare*. Was she trying to convey that the world of this novel might just entrap the reader just as it has entrapped its occupants?

The planet Snare is home to two species, the hu'mai (humans) and the indigenous life form, the Cha'Meech. Eight hundred years before the events of the novel, the hu'mai were left stranded on Snare, their colonization ships completely off course, disabled, and unable to return to human space. As a result, the Cha'Meech and the technologically advanced humans reached an agreement to ensure both species' survival. The negotiations, finalized in a compact called the Landfall Treaty, were complicated by the fact that the humans were split into three camps: the ships' crew and staff, a group wishing to establish an Islamic society, and a group of genetically engineered supersoldiers no longer needed by humankind and wishing to establish a new society to forget about their own past. The soldiers and the Muslims were supposed to settle on different worlds, but were forced to live with one another in addition to the Cha'Meech—an unexpected scenario that led the original human inhabitants to give the planet its name. While those colonists chose the name as a metaphor for their plight, the name ultimately takes on a prophetic connotation.

As the novel starts, growing political turmoil in Kazrajistan—inhabited by the Islamic hu'mai—threatens the fragile coexistence between the Cha'Meech and the separate human societies. The Great Khan is considering using his military to expand his grasp on the world. Kazraki dissidents get a message from his brother, Jezro Khan, thought dead for the past 15 years, who announces he is alive and well in an area far to the east of Kazrajistan. Sensing an opportunity, they decide to send Idres Warkannan, a former friend of Jezro's and a member of the military, to find him and convince him that the country needs his return. The Chosen, a secretive order whose sole mission is to defend the Great Khan, find out about the revolutionary cell but are unable to completely ascertain the revolutionaries' plans. They decide to send one of their own men, Zayn Hassan, on an undercover mission to flush out and trap the dissidents. Warkannan, with the help of his nephew Arfazo and a Yarl Souran, a self-proclaimed "sorcerer," are in the process of trying to bring down the Great Khan. As these four men set about their tasks, a chain of events begins that ultimately brings a number of other entanglements, difficulties and impediments.

At the start of his mission, Zayn finds himself living by the good graces of a connee tribe. The connees, the descendants of the genetically engineered soldiers, live on the eastern fringes of Kazrajistan and lead an existence very similar to that of Native Americans in the Great Plains before the arrival of European settlers. Ammadin, their Spirit Rider (a kind of holy woman), is in the middle of a crisis of faith. Nonetheless, she continues serving the tribe until she can figure out a way to supply them with another Spirit Rider so that she may go off on her own to find answers to her questions. When she does, Ammadin takes Zayn along with her, having surmised that he too is facing some sort of crisis.

Zayn's crisis is brought about almost by accident. While staying with the connee, he realizes that he has found a place where he is most comfortable being himself. However, his oath to the Chosen, as well as conditioning he underwent when initiated, prevents him both from just deserting and from telling Ammadin what his crisis is. On his own with no one to turn to, Zayn's crisis deepens when he finally discovers that Jezro, who was one of his best friends before his sudden disappearance and presumed death, is still alive. Now, in addition to conflicting loyalties to the Chosen and the connee, he faces conflicting loyalties to the state he serves and one of the men who loved him best.

The entanglements become more complicated and greater in number as the characters move further along. Warkannan, deeply but not fanatically religious, starts having a crisis of faith as he starts to learn the truth about the history of hu'mai on Snare. Souran, who eventually reveals he's not a sorcerer but someone who is very knowledgeable about the technology of the original settlers, finds himself in a trap of his own making and is wanted by authorities for a rape made possible, in part, by the very technology he employs. Jezro, once found by Warkannan, despairs as a result of his Hobson's choice: turn his back completely on Kazrajistan and allow his brother to subjugate and terrorize his subjects, or return to start a civil war and directly or indirectly cause the death of thousands. However, these traps pale in comparison to the one threatening to envelop all of Snare, including the Cha'Meech: the impending and unpreventable failure of the Landfall Treaty and resulting implications.

While setting up these events, Kerr employs an illusion to draw the reader in. The 800-year history of the planet is only very gradually made clear to the reader, and as a result Kerr takes advantage of Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." In this novel, however, there's a slight twist. The basis of much of the magic and religion the hu'mai encounter is science and high-tech instruments with forgotten origins and functions, and because Kerr takes special care to reveal the mystery gradually, she gets to employ an early snare of her own: is this a fantasy or sf novel? For me this is an important question, because I employ different reading protocols when reading the two. This questions gains relevance given Kerr's long success with her Deverry fantasy series. While she eventually makes it crystal clear (she does deploy a number of hints before making it obvious), Clarke's Third Law remains in play as many of the characters do not fully understand what they are dealing with throughout much of the novel.

Because the history of Snare is not completely revealed until nearly the end of the novel, Kerr repeats this game, in a fashion, throughout the rest of the novel. Pieces of leftover connee technology, often called "spirits" or "magics," litter the world. Throughout, Kerr provides clues and hints allowing the reader to figure out the science behind their operation before completely spelling it out. For example, she provides clues that much of the remaining technology is solar-powered and that the voice commands are in a forgotten human language. She does the same with many of the hu'mai myths and legends, giving clues to their origins and development before providing the whole story. Kerr pulls this game off with great aplomb, never once insulting the reader's intelligence.

There is another theme throughout *Suarez*: religion. Religion has played a pivotal role throughout most of human history and will likely continue to, given the almost universal need for faith-based systems. Since much of it is really about the present, in light of the events of 9/11 Kerr's decision to have one of the three groups of his 'mai practice a modified Islam invites inquiries as to whether she's commenting about Islamic extremism or the state of relations between today's Islamic world and the Western world. Although Kerr avoids making broad, overarching statements about these issues, she does have a few things to say.

Obviously, Warkannan and Zayn provide Kerr with the most convenient lenses to filter her ruminations through. Warkannan presents a balanced approach to religion. A religious individual who takes the time to practice his faith as he was taught, he is also a practical and intelligent everyman. As a result, when he encounters evidence that convincingly and logically contradicts the religious aspects and beliefs of his education, such as when he discovers the true origin of humankind on Suarez, which conflicts with what he was taught, he adapts his faith to accommodate the new knowledge. It's not easy for him to do, but he sees the necessity of it. Zayn, on the other hand, suffered as a result of the dark side of religious fundamentalism. His father made his life miserable and caused significant emotional damage because he displayed traits declared demonic by the mullahs. Zayn ultimately felt like an outcast in his own society, trying his best to hide his demonic talents out of fear of further ostracism. Yet, at the end Kerr seems to suggest that despite the many evils perpetrated under the guise of religious fundamentalism, there is a place for some aspects of it, as Zayn's father, who became a cleric after Zayn became an adult, plays an integral role in creating a workable post-Landfall Treaty society.

Interestingly, Kerr uses Soutan for her strongest condemnation of fanaticism. His faith in the original colonists' technology and the science behind it is just as fanatical and steadfast as that of a hard-core religious fundamentalist. His fervent belief that the original colonization ships are still intact and accessible leads him to abuse

many others, including Jezro and Arkazo, in his attempt to reach his goal: the Ark of the Covenant—what Soutan believes to be the original colony ship and just one of many examples of an old Earth legend mutated into a new Suarez legend. It's because of his belief in technology that can get him off the planet that Soutan also fervently believes as truth a book, *The Sibylline Prophecies*, that most just consider a compendium of legends and myths. It's an unusual twist for an novel with religious overtones, the antagonist, one whose goals are the most twisted, is the person who possibly understands the science of the original colonists the best.

Kerr's examination of Islam is not the only religious aspect of the novel. She also takes the time to flesh out the religion of the comenecs and the role of their Spirit Riders. Ammadin's struggles with the faith she helps propagate only serve to bolster the pragmatic take on religion shown by Warkannan. Near the end of her spiritual introspection, Ammadin is asked, "What's more important? Being happy or knowing the truth?" In the end, she chooses the truth. She does so because she feels it will make happiness easier to obtain. However, in choosing the truth she knowingly brings about the end of the comenec religion as it's practiced and known.

In addition to allowing Kerr to create a few more subplots and a more complex story arc, not showing the humans as a united culture against the Cha'Meech gives the novel an added touch of realism. It also makes sense given the differing cultures from which the groups are descended, not to mention human history. In addition to the fast paced storytelling, Kerr also drags you in with her cast of flawed and engaging characters. Most of the people are just trying to do the best they can in the situation they're in, and they succeed, fail and change based on their strengths and weaknesses. Just as important, she manages to avoid preaching when making her statements about religion and its role in society. Overall, *Suarez* is a novel you'll enjoy becoming engrossed in. ▶

Matthew Appleton lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

Thirteen Phantasms by James Blaylock New York: Ace Books, 2003; \$14.00 tpb; 356 pages reviewed by Michael Cule

It was in the pleasant, balmy June of the year ought-three that I began, dear reader, to read that fatal volume, and it was in the sweetening heat of July that I completed the task. How little I anticipated, when I took my first certain steps along the path, where my meanderings would end.

The life of the reviewer is a hard and solitary one, requiring a mind as acute as a surgeon's, as generous as a saint's, and as broad as any encyclopedia's. The strains of judgment and charity, finely balanced, have driven men (less well endowed men than myself, I need hardly say) to the teetering edge of eccentricity. And as I sit here, wearing but my kaftan (a gift brought back from Turkey by a female relative), my surgical stockings, and my trusty Panama hat, it may be thought that I have for the moment wandered from the point. Pausing but to sup a drink of mineral water (which is all my doctors allow me since the unfortunate incident at the Royal Society of Arts smoker) I toss aside such criticism. For the tension and duty of a reviewer's life was never better shown than in considering the work named above.

Ah, July in England! When the fatal heat permeates the day and night bringing to both a fatal lethargy and the attention of flies, which hover around the edge of the consciousness like an ill-digested metaphor of decay. Some may attribute that heat to climatic changes brought about by an ill-advised addiction to fossil fuels, but those of you who read my monograph on the strange events in Crouch End during the so-called Winter of Discontent will be able, no doubt, to draw your own conclusions.

Let me force my mind from this sub-Wellian, sub-Lovecraftian, sub-standard pastiche into which it has fallen from reading some of Mr. Blaylock's *oeuvre* and concentrate it upon the virtues of his writing which lie mostly in those stories where he takes wing in his own land, or at least in the peculiar subset of it which he shares with Mr. Timothy

Powers (with whom he also shares authorship of two of these tales): the seedy suburbs and the decaying mans of its older, more eccentric citizens.

I have seldom read a book, my friends, in which the everyday corruption of a life that is aging and disappointing, eccentric and on the fringe of mundane reality is better realized. Some of the images will be with me for some time (drat them!) a dead fly by a wax undertaker's dummy, a man considering whether to raid a dumpster for yesterday's doughnuts, a fat man's favorite trousers whipped off by a passing vehicle and found later by the side of the road. And the men (for all the central characters here are male, women being but supporting players), mostly older, mostly married and mostly slightly mad, whether their theories of the origins of flying saucers, the nature of the luminiferous ether, or of the perfect comestible, turn out to be justified or not. After a while, dear friend, I regret to say, their voices began to merge together in my mind, but perhaps the fault of that lies in me.

The volume begins gradually in the piece from which it takes its name, with a homage to the days of the pulps, a literal travelling back to the days when science-fiction fans were serious men with wire-rimmed glasses and slide rules, which establishes the territory we are exploring as that once ruled over by *Weird Tales*. But there is (alas there is, I found myself drawn to say) a "post-modernist" (to use an expression I dislike) tint to Mr. Blaylock's collection. Often, too often, only mood and character and not incident are his concerns. Things are hinted at, volumes of words are produced, but in the tales, nothing happens. Which is well in its way, indeed Mr. Becker made much of it in his theatrical pieces, but there is only so much mood and character one can take without a leavening of incident. "What an intolerable deal of sack," I found myself muttering . . . but the literate reader will finish the quotation for himself.

In three of the tales, Mr. Blacklock turns to the tradition of the tall tale, told by a Victorian explorer in his explorers club, and these do not displease the mind although they have caused me to fall into this avuncular and irritating persona for the nonce. In others he echoes Lovecraft or perhaps Machen in tales of fairy realities glimpsed from afar, of dragons constructed in back sheds, of strange things glimpsed in roadside aquariums. (Or is that aquaria? The heat and my advancing age have left me but an indifferent Latinist.)

Let not Mr. Blacklock be discouraged at my words. (As if he could, the praises of far more noted scribes than I adorn this edition, issued in

the popular and cheaper form for the first time.) But let him add to character and mood, which he has mastered, more of the happy creativity of incident, event, plot which he shows here in such pieces as "The Old Curiosity Shop" and "Bugs," which latter contains the funniest sex scene I have read in a long time. (And if that statement cannot be twisted by the publisher's publicity puffery into something catchpenny to gull the underscoring public into buying this superior piece of work, then they know not their trade.)

Michael Cule lives in London, England.

Javier A. Martínez More on Wrestling Fantasy

I read with great enthusiasm and pleasure Anna Sunshine Ison's essay on *lucha libre*, "From Santo to Sainthood: The Wrestler as Fantastic Hero." Because of a commitment I had at another session, I could not attend her reading at this year's ICFA where she presented a version of this essay, although I did have the opportunity to talk with her about it later that day. I knew that NTRSF would most likely be publishing it and so I had been on the lookout for it all this time.

Ison's essay did not disappoint. She does a nice job in referring to some of the preliminary groundwork exploring professional wrestling, including Barthes' important early study and the more recent work by Sharon Maer and Heather Levi. I was also glad to see that Mexican writers were included, including Olivera Figueroa's memoirs and Nelson Carro's book of *lucha* films. And I applaud Ison for mentioning the ongoing graphic narrative of Los Bros. Hernandez, two of the most innovative practitioners of the fantastic in the arts who remain unknown to many critics. I would like to add, however, a few comments to Ison's observations.

Ison's discussion of professional wrestling as a phenomenon in both the U. S. and Mexico might blur some of the significant distinctions between wrestling in the States and *lucha* in Mexico. The popularity of *lucha libre*, as imported in the Mexican wrestling film, in non-Mexican cultures can be attributed largely in part to their value as "camp." The absurd aspects of these films are usually highlighted as the source of viewing pleasure. One cannot blame the non-Mexican audiences for this, as it would require a Herculean feat of interpretive discipline to take seriously a paunchy and aging man in a silver mask fighting Aztec mummies. Yet it is important for American audiences to understand that the suspension of disbelief, as Ison so rightfully refers to it, that occurs in audiences in the North is not the same as the suspension of disbelief that occurs in the audiences of the South. What for an American is the stuff of midnight movies and late-night cable marathons speaks directly to a Mexican sensibility about the presence of the supernatural in the real world. Mexico is a country steeped deeply in the intrusion of the unreal into everyday life. This is at least in part due to the Catholic tradition. After all, Mexican Catholics (93% of the nation, or approximately 90 million people) fervently believe that the virgin mother of Christ, transformed into a native woman, appeared to a peasant, the recently canonized Juan Diego, and heaped roses upon him. American audiences watch *lucha libre* films because they are ridiculous fantasy; Mexican audiences watch *lucha libre* films because they are ridiculous realism, and because they are, to borrow a phrase from Chesterton, "more than true." Chesterton was talking about fairy tales; *lucha* films are a type of modern fairy tale. As Ison states, "Wrestling reminds us that the fantastic, or at least something that resembles it, takes place in our own world."

The audiences of the North are beginning to catch on, obviously, with the popularity of the WWF, now WWE, but I think this performance always operates under the strain of legitimacy. In other words, it wants to be real. The grass-roots movement of backyard wrestling takes this impulse to its logical extreme. Teens and overzealous adults import the fantasy of American wrestling and recreate it as real in their backyards. The result is fifteen-year-olds setting themselves on fire and men who really should know better scraping each other's faces off with kitchen implements. The development here is from the patently unreal to the disturbing real.

This movement, I think, also implies something even more unsettling, namely, that by claiming the unreal as their own, a generation of American fans are attempting to usurp something that by its very definition is always rooted in fantasy. It is a type of control that is being exerted over the imaginative faculty, to try to force it to conform to reality, as if reality had so much more to teach us, or as if it was any better than the fantasy which supports it.

I do not see this happening in Mexican culture. One need only attend a *lucha* match to understand that the spectacle in the ring is matched by the carnal atmosphere outside the ring. Part of the multimedia presentation on *lucha* which I make to organizations and clubs in South Texas incorporates some video that I took at a local match. One of the scenes I captured was of about a dozen children, more than half of them girls, rushing into the ring between matches, jumping around, mimicking the *luchadores* while the crowd goes mad. Another shot is of a child going up to a wrestler, feigning injury outside the ring, to ask for an autograph. The wrestler breaks with his routine, gives the boy his autograph, then returns to his act; all the while the other wrestler stands back while this intrusion into the fantasy plays out. What is happening here is a kind of interplay between the real and the unreal, a moving back and forth between poles. The vacillation that occurs in a Mexican environment is, in an American landscape, transformed into a choice between extremes. Insurance issues aside, it is this full engagement of opposites, not the attempt to subvert one in favor of the other, that separates Mexican and U.S. wrestling traditions.

The Mexican wrestling film is the result of this balancing act. We are left with the impression that El Santo goes grocery shopping wearing his mask, that he cuts the yard wearing his mask, that he shaves (somehow) wearing his mask, that he makes . . . well, you get the idea. The point is that all this makes perfect sense within a Mexican framework. It is not just the suspension of disbelief, rather the acceptance of disbelief. The Mexican wrestling film is something that could have happened only in Mexico: in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, in a poor country, in a country where impoverished millions crave justice as much as they crave mystery. Is it any wonder then, that when an aging Santo removed his mask on live television two weeks before he died of a stroke, the magic he had evoked for more than three decades was almost shattered? Mexican audiences do not need the real. They need the unreal to remind them of what is important, because in the Mexican imagination the most important things are unreal and therefore true. This is not escapism, but its opposite. Santo's burial is a perfect example of what I mean. Mexico City all but closed down for the afternoon when millions of fans followed the funeral procession to catch a glimpse of the fallen hero, dressed in a suit and, of course, wearing his mask.

This letter is not a critique of Ison's essay. Quite the opposite: it is a gesture of thanks for her fine work. I hope some of her enthusiasm for the films and the tradition inspire others to do more work in this provocative field. Finally, I have to admit that I'm a bit miffed at Kevin Maroney. He beat me to the punch on this one. Ison's work would have fit so nicely with what Mack Hassler and I are doing in our modest publication.

Javier A. Martínez lives in Brownsville, Texas and is editor of Extrapolation.

Veniss Underground by Jeff VanderMeer
Canton, Ohio: Prime Books, 2003; \$15.00 tpb; 188 pages
reviewed by David Soyka

Jeff VanderMeer's breakout work—for fantasy enthusiasts of a literary bent, at least, if perhaps not the larger literary community—was the *Book of Ambergris*, a linked compendium of cryptic tales in which a surreal cityscape is both background and a primary character. His latest work, *Veniss Underground*, is not an Ambergris story, though it exhibits the urban phantasmagoria that has perhaps become a VanderMeer trademark. Interestingly though, in an author's afterword, VanderMeer makes a connection between the two in terms of their sources of origin, if not geography:

I also think of the relationship between *Veniss Underground* and my Ambergris stories, with their own, much more enigmatic, underground. While I was writing *Veniss Underground*, Ambergris began to colonize my imagination. In a way, this happened at just the right time. For very sound reasons—frustrating to the more direct part of my nature—I could not describe the subterranean passageways of Ambergris in anything other than fragments and conflicting glimpses. The integrity of the stories I was writing at the time would have been threatened by a clear view. But for the third part of *Veniss Underground*, I needed to strip away the darkness of a subterranean land and show, unflinchingly, what hid in that darkness. In a strange way, *Veniss Underground* allowed me to show readers—metaphorically, at the level at which images resonate—the nether parts of Ambergris.

Veniss Underground is VanderMeer's subversive take on the Orpheus myth. You'll recall that Orpheus failed to rescue his wife, Eurydice, from Hades because he violated a divine command that he not look back at her during their journey to the land of the living. In VanderMeer's version, while the rescue of the beloved is actually effected, "the look back" is an existential revelation in which the hero/rescuer is condemned to dwell. *Veniss* is a far-future city that has undergone some sort of sociopolitical upheaval such that not all the institutions are functioning properly.

Back a decade, when the social planners ruled, we called it Dayton Central. Then, when the central government choked flat and the police all went freelance, we started calling it Veniss—like an adder's hiss, deadly and unpredictable.

Of course, the city is every city (a crumbling infrastructure and bloated bureaucracy are perhaps by definition urban characteristics), with a professional class living, in this case, literally on top of an underbelly of alienated corruption. *Veniss* also brings to mind "Venus," specifically the "Venus de Milo," an image reinforced by Damon Andrews's cover art, and her crippled beauty. The "underground" of the title refers to the Dantean levels beneath the city in which a serving underclass (literally) supports the surface life; but when the deteriorating city no longer has need for their services, these "underbellys" evolve independently in strange ways.

The story is told from three viewpoints: a first person narrative by Nicholas, a failed aspirant to perfect Living Art—"the art you can touch and squeeze and hold onto your chest, not the dead, flat-screen scrawled stuff"; the tale of his fraternal "not grown" sister, Nicola, told in the second person; and, for what takes up the bulk of the story, the third-person recounting of Shadrach, an underworld native who by chance of lottery selection is allowed migration from the darkness of the Underground to the top city level. Perhaps equally by happenstance, Nicola observes Shadrach emerging into the light for the first time. "He was no different than any of the others who, by chance or connections, had been allowed to come out of the tunnel into the light, except that somehow he made you smile. His eyes held you, and you found yourself thinking how odd it was that to find the light you must descend into darkness." The pair fall in love, and the relationship allows Nicola to emerge into her own

sense of light as a fully formed individual separate from her brother Nicholas.

To fully become that individual, dependent on no one, Nicola will fall out of love with Shadrach. "What does the statue say to be who made her?" But when Nicholas disappears, she turns to Shadrach for help. Unbeknownst to her, Nicholas has begged Shadrach for information about Quin, an outlaw bio-engineer whose creatures were originally intended as servants to humans. Quin, however, also dabbles in cross-gened manipulated monstrosities that started out as toys, but are now conjured for the sake of "art"—even if that art is purely for the purpose of seeing how monstrous you can be.

Though he knows of the last desperate actions of Nicholas to seek the dangerous employ of Quin, Shadrach merely tells Nicola, "I'm sure he will show up." Then Nicola receives a meerkat enhanced with human intelligence, a gift ostensibly from Nicholas. The meerkat reveals some disturbing truths about the eventual fate of humans who rely on these manufactured creatures, Nicola's discovery of this secret leads to her demise, but not outright death. She is delivered unconscious into the depths beneath Veniss, her body to be mated for "spare parts," spliced onto those with the money and connections to purchase them.

Shadrach realizes Nicola's fate when he sees a woman whose newly grafted hand contains an unmistakable blemish that belonged to his former lover. He descends into hell—literally and figuratively—to rescue the woman who no longer loves him and to discover the fate of both Nicholas and the man ultimately responsible for Nicola's dilemma, the master-manipulator whose lowest-level domain seethes with inhuman creatures of caprice. *Veniss Underground* is Shadrach's story, with the literal Nicola/Nicholas duality metaphorically positing aspects of his own personality to face and overcome.

His journey is populated by the usual "VanderMeerisms" of strange creatures (meerkats instead of squid) and references to fantastical literature—from the obvious Wizard of Oz to the perhaps more obscure adoption of Quin and his "Shanghai Circus" organization from the Edna Whittemore novel of the same name. In an author interview that apparently appears only in advance review copies, VanderMeer, an admirer of Whittemore's work, notes that other than cribbing an exotic sounding name, "There is no connection between Whittemore's novel and mine, except they're both short." As for the literary jokes, VanderMeer said in a letter to me, "The purpose of most of the allusions to other works of fiction reflects Quin's reading experience, and thus what he wants to create. He's strip-mining all the old myths, stories, etc. This is a rather different purpose than the allusions in my Ambergris fiction."

It's a sign of the times that a 188-page fantasy would be described as "short." There's no extensive backstory, no maps of the city, no likelihood of a sequel. There's really only one character—Shadrach—and the realization of what he can ascend to, what descends he must make, and ultimately, how he rises above them.

This is a powerful meditation on the depths of a man's soul and the need to make both literal and figurative Kierkegaardian leaps of faith. Short though it may be, it is jam-packed with metaphors and literary allusions that will keep English majors up nights. For the rest of us, unburdened by the compulsions of academe, we read *Veniss Underground* because, beneath the trappings of the fantastical, it is altogether about the real. ▶

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The New York Review of Science Fiction:
Fair & Balanced

Gumshoe Gorilla by Keith Hartman
Atlanta: Melisha Merlin, 2001; \$16.00 tpb; 416 pages
reviewed by Michael Levy

Keith Hartman has the kind of background most writers would kill for: a degree from Princeton, a couple of years at the London School of Economics, an unfinished Ph.D. in finance from Duke University, stints as a choreographer and as an exotic dancer, work as a theater critic, and, oh yes, two years performing with the Princeton Mime Company. He began his career as a professional writer with a work of nonfiction, *Congregations in Conflict*, which dealt with how a variety of different churches have handled the issue of homosexuality.

His first novel, *The Gumshoe, the Witch, and the Virtual Corpse*, was a considerable success, garnering award nominations as both a mystery and a science fiction novel, and actually managed to continue Hartman's exploration of the intersection between religion and homosexuality. The gumshoe of the title, Drew Parker, is a former cop, a former call boy, a successful detective catering to a largely gay clientele, and, in traditional hardboiled fashion, possessed of a heart of gold. The witch is his partner, Jennifer Gray, a Wicca practitioner with a sometimes nasty temper, whose magic actually seems to work. The book also qualifies as science fiction because it's set approximately twenty-five years in the future in a somewhat grim, somewhat dystopian America where right-wing evangelical Christianity has gained even more power than it has under the current Republican administration.

Gumshoe Gorilla, the second book in the series, features many long and highly positive blurbs from such fine writers as Nicola Griffith, Mike Resnick, Nancy Kress, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Charles de Lint, and P. C. Hodgell. The novel again features Drew and Jen, along with Hartman's trademark use of multiple first person narrators. The title, by the way, comes from a now defunct television series that both detectives remember fondly which concerned an uplifted gorilla who worked as a private eye. On several occasions over the course of the novel Drew dreams about the gorilla, who gives him advice and appears to be something of a guardian angel. I have to admit, however, that I have no idea why Hartman considered the beast important enough to name the book after him and put his face on the cover rather than Drew's.

As is typical of hardboiled detective novels, the action results in part from Drew's professional life and in part from his private life. He and his partner are hired by a young woman who believes that her boyfriend, the famous actor Charles Rockland, is hiding something from her. In fact, Drew soon discovers evidence that Rockland is either fooling around, in trouble, or both. What makes the whole situation more complex, however, is the fact that Charles is part of a five-clone set, raised from birth, along with his brothers, to be actors, and Hartman portrays Charles's mother with wonderful and acid wit as the ultimate obnoxious, publicity-seeking stage mom.

David Langford
Random Reading 6

Iain Banks, *The Business* (1999): An almost effortless-seeming romp whose background assumption is the actually more or less benign global conspiracy of the title. Full of enjoyably odd ideas, from the lunacy of transmitting a significant number *via* binary-coded tooth extractions performed on an unwilling victim, to the ingenuity whereby our tough heroine wrenches vital information from an alpha male by locking herself in his beloved Ferrari and boosting the revs into the red zone until, outside, he cracks at the shriek of tortured metal. I didn't believe a word of it, but for all its frothiness *The Business* oozes charm and sophistication. May alienate some of readers with its gear-spun refusal to overthrow, expose, or even (more than minimally) reform the world-dominating Business.

Avram Davidson, *Vergil in Averno* (1987): Like the better-known *The Phoenix and the Mirror*, this belongs to Davidson's unfinished sequence "The Vergil Magus Matrix." Its promising basis was to assume the truth of the medieval legends of Vergil as sorcerer, the kind of stories that tended to attach themselves to learned men, most notably Roger Bacon and Johann Faust. In this dark novel—eccentrically paced, crabbed, and crusted with strange erudition—Vergil Magus is obscurely summoned to the "Very Rich Town" of Averno, where volcanic activity provides cheap power for the arts of fire and metal, all under a thick haze of associated pollution. The city magicians apparently want him to do something about their dwindling subterranean fires; but secretly they "know" what needs to be done, they have laid plans which only begin with appointing a madman as King of Averno, and they make appalling use of our hero's ingenious salamander-researched maps of the underworld. Despite many fine scenes and an apocalyptic climax, there is something unsatisfactory about Vergil's ineffectiveness here—forever groping in fog, slow to understand the sinister motives and portents all around him, saved only by a barely foreshadowed magical intervention. A very tasty read, though, and I liked the irony that quite falsely weaves the ultimate fate of Averno into Vergil's

own legend, as the natural retribution for not paying your hired magus. Also notable are brief flashbacks to a harsh school of magic which makes Earthsea's look vamps. One test requires the class of would-be mages to compare two fungi for a set period ("the smallest of sandglasses, such as the frugal housewife uses to time the boiling of a pigeon's egg") and use all their carefully honed skills to identify and discard the specimen unsuitable for the pot. Then, of course: "That one which now remains in front of you. Pick it up. Eat." It is so characteristically Davidsonish to skip straight from this line to a brief exchange which ends the flashback: "Ser Proctor, was it needful that those who erred did die?" ... "Their clients will not die."

David and Leigh Eddings, *The Elder Gods* (2003): My first-ever encounter with these prolific authors, undertaken solely for corrupt personal gain. The enormous sales of the Eddings' fantasies had somehow led me to hope for better dialogue from self-confessed gods than (reasonably) closing a chapter: "It's the only way we have to save Dhrall from the forces of the Vllgh." Meanwhile the human races are called things like Maags and Trogites. Thus a Mag freebooster confides: "The notion of picking Trogit vessels like apples off a tree lights a warm fire in my belly." Oh dear, oh dear.

Greg Egan, *Terramen* (1999): A belated catch-up. It's an odd coincidence that another Greg tackled issues of rampant genetic reprogramming in the same year. Bear, with *Darwin's Radio*. Egan's story moves well for most of its length, but eventually defied my (fairly well developed) power of suspending disbelief with a closing scene in which the story's nightmare McGuffin, a species-crossing gene which rebuilds its victims into forms it "thinks" better adapted to survive, displays a sufficient collective understanding of evolutionary game theory that it can be reasoned with or even bluffed. To paraphrase brutally: "Oh good, I've been given an opportunity to reproduce myself outside the hero's body, which satisfies my biological imperatives, so now I can halt his hideous ongoing metamorphosis and restore him to normal. . . ." Sorry, Mr. Egan, I just can't believe it.

Following this plot thread, Drew and Jen find themselves dealing with, among a number of other memorable characters, a gay, cross-dressing Cherokee shaman, a mortal artist in a clown mask, and a brace of villainous televangelists.

Gunshee Gorilla is a genuine genre bender. It's a work of science fiction, a fantasy, a hardboiled detective novel, a gay adventure story with just a bit of romance, and a satire on both filmmaking and evangelical Christianity. At some points it's funny as heck; at others it's scary as hell. Particularly humorous is the scene where Jen gets back at a two-timing boyfriend by trashing his apartment with magic spells, spoiled fish, and superglue. And I loved the chapter where Charles Rockland and two of his brothers star in a popular television series designed for several different niche audiences. The three clones take turns filming not only a PG-rated version, but both gay and straight X-rated variations of the show as well. On the darker side are a vampire sex club and other appalling things.

Returning to Hartman's serious interest in the problematic intersection between homosexuality and Christianity, one of his basic science-fictional premises is that some time in the past, around our present time actually, scientists discovered a gay gene, making it possible for parents to know with near one-hundred-percent certainty if their children were going to grow up to be homosexuals. Hartman suggests the possibility that thousands of these young children would be either abandoned by their parents or actually placed in what amounts to concentration camps. Although the horrors of AIDS aren't even mentioned in the novel, most of the younger gay characters are survivors of such camps and bear a darkness upon their souls as a result. Although Hartman's primary

purpose in *Gunshee Gorilla* is to entertain, he does thus explore some of the same dark territory concerning the willingness of parents to turn on their "different" children that Greg Bear covered in his recent novels *Darwin's Radio* (1999) and *Darwin's Children* (2003).

Although *Gunshee Gorilla* is many things, it is, first and foremost, a mystery novel, and we are in fact presented with a series of mysteries. What kind of trouble is Charles in? How exactly is Charles's never-did-we'll-clone-brother, Eddie, involved, and how many of the novel's characters will Eddie manage to seduce? Is someone really trying to bring down the head of the Baptist News Network? How exactly are the Cherokee connected to the plot?

I have to admit that I found the end of the book a bit of a letdown, though. It's one of those typical detective novel things—one of the reasons, perhaps, that I don't read that many detective novels—where the characters, having come to several entirely believable but wrong conclusions, eventually sit down in a room, put two and thirteen together, and finally figure out exactly who done it. I've always found such endings a bit anticlimactic. Still, this is definitely a fun read. I highly recommend it and have already ordered the first novel in the series, *The Gunshee, the Witch, and the Virtual Corpse*, from the publisher. Maybe, I keep telling myself, the first *Gunshee* book will explain the damn gorilla! ▶

Michael Levy, whose wife is a major fan of *Koko the gorilla*, lives in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Edward Gorcey, *The Headless Bust: A Melancholy Meditation on the Fall Millennium* (1999). A happy surprise, one last chapbook by this great man. Certain characters from his *Christmas Carol*-influenced *The Haunted Toy-Coy* (1997) are wafted from one allegedly morally improving scene to another, with suitably bizarre illustrations captioned in doggerel. A characteristic moment of post-seasonal charity when all is over:

Fruitcake was sawed in blocks and sent
To Havens for the Indigent,
Where it was used for scouring floors
And propping open banging doors.

Alan Moore, J. H. Williams III, Mick Grey, et al., *Prometheus Book 3* (2002). Yet more of this weirdly mystical comic, in which action-adventure tropes (zapping demons, socking supervillains on the jaw, saving the world, etc.) are increasingly upstaged by exploration of the multiverse as Moore personally sees it in terms of ritual magic. In past episodes, we've had a dose of planetary and elemental symbolism, an entire issue devoted to Tantric sex, and another complexly pondering the Tarot trumps; now our eponymous heroine is engaged in a vast metaphorical tour of the Kahala's Tree of Life, and I gather that some fans are getting a little jaded by the relative dearth of two-fisted action. It still looks beautiful, though.

Bill Napier, *The Lure* (2002). A scientifically literate novel of SETI and alien signals, presented as a techno-thriller rather than sci-fi—less concerned with the impact of awesome biochemical revelations from Out There than with paranoid governments trying to suppress it all by, if necessary, assassinating entire research teams. Perhaps the book's US President would indeed take theological advice from ghostly fundamentalists in such a case, but Napier's fundies are such unbelievable caricatures. . . . Too much routine chasing around, I felt, while the real story was skimped; but no doubt paying attention to large-scale and long-term concerns would have been regarded as just too sloppy, fatally compromising *The Lure's* placement in the Thriller/Bestseller niche.

E. S. Turner, *Boy Will Be Boy* (1948, updated 1975): A jolly survey of ripping yarns which reminded me of a friend's playful suggestion that the recent Savoy book *Zenith the Albino* by Anthony Skene might

be a clever modern pastiche rather than a 1930s rediscovery. For what it's worth, Turner's long list of Sexton Blake's regular foes does include "Zenith the Albino, afflicted with a colorless skin but far from colorless personality, whose possession of infra-red binoculars put all London's wealth at his peril." It is also confirmed that narratives revolving around absurdly many plot coupons have been around a lot longer than commercial fantasy: e.g., a 1920s "story of twelve seaports scattered all over the world in which were twelve sailors each with different portions of a map tattooed on their backs, all would have to be traced before the sunken galleon with the gold aboard could be located. . . . It did not follow that a series involving seven feathers or twelve pieces of map would necessarily run for seven or twelve installments. If the series was a flop the hero could recover two or more keys or pieces of map in one installment; if it was a success he could be tricked out of the whole lot and have to start again." Witty and knowledgeable, though a little disdainfully hazy about modern (1970s) superhero comics as compared with the meticulous treatment of "classic" pulps.

Chris Wooding, *The Weavers of Serenity* (2003): A fantasy which I admired despite reservations. Yes, this trilogy-starter has much of the pace, inventiveness, and sense of danger expected from the gifted author of *The Hatching of Alastair Gray*. But I have an unworthy feeling that the liberating thrill of at last writing for adults has gone to Wooding's head. (It's not as though he pulled that many punches in work for "younger readers.") The bad guys of the title aren't just ugly, arrogant, treacherous, murderous, semi-insane, and responsible for both poisoning the land and putting the blame for this on innocents, but are hideously rotted and afflicted with cancer as a side effect of their nasty practices, and have drifted into the habit of repeatedly raping and killing children (sometimes, for variety, elderly women), to which everyone turns a blind eye because the Weavers' psychic powers are so jolly useful. At one point, seven horrified men stand for two hours listening at the door as a Weaver has his repellant way, again and again, with a twelve-year-old boy who does not survive the experience: "None would move, for it would be an unpardonable shame to turn their backs; and yet none dared intervene, either." All of which, I submit, is overdoing things. Plausible villains whose motives we could (however slightly) share would play so much better than these absurd, nightmare caricatures. ▶

Richard Horton
Several Brief Reviews

Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom (New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$22.95 hc; 208 pages) is Cory Doctorow's first novel. He's attracted quite a bit of well-deserved attention for his short fiction, including the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2000. His work is characterized by a near-future focus on cutting-edge, even "hip," technology, and at his best his stories are stuffed, paragraph by paragraph, with invention—through-composed, as it were. In this way he reminds me of his sometime collaborator Charles Stross, and, to go back a generation, of Bruce Sterling. Doctorow also takes a great interest in what might be similarly called cutting-edge, hip social organizations.

These characteristics certainly describe *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*. The key technological advance is immortality, by means of periodic brain state uploads that can be downloaded into force-grown clones if anything fatal happens (at the cost of losing whatever memories you accumulated in the interval between your last upload and your death). The central social change is an economy based on "Whuffie"—essentially status or reputation. Basic needs are available to everyone (that is, this is a post-scarcity economy), and for anything more one calls on one's "Whuffie" points, instantly uploaded and accessible by means of direct mental links to some sort of future internet.

The hero is Jules, who works at Walt Disney World, helping maintain the attractions at Liberty Square and Tom Sawyer Island. Jules is over 100 years old, but his girlfriend Lil is in her early twenties. She's a second-generation member of the "ad hococracy" that took over Walt Disney World, gaining Whuffie points by keeping the rides interesting. An old friend of Jules named Dan shows up, depressed and ready to die for good. His career was based on convincing holdout groups to join the new economy, but for some reason his Whuffie is down to nothing. Jules convinces Dan to join Lil's team in fighting off a threat to their ad hococracy from a group that wants to replace the old-fashioned rides with new, higher-tech attractions.

The action revolves around Jules's murder. After his revival, Jules becomes convinced that the rival team committed the murder in order to distract Lil's team and advance their takeover plans. In addition, Jules's direct link to the net is breaking down, making it hard for him to do further uploads. Jules becomes more and more unstable, taking direct action against his rivals (much frowned upon), and alienating friends like Lil and her team in the process, until he finally figures out what really happened.

It's a pretty interesting book, a good quick read at under 50,000 words. (As such, it is a good example of a novel that is the right size for its story, even if that size is often regarded as uncommercial.) There are some shortcomings. The magic allure of Walt Disney World as a major "new economy" source of Whuffie points didn't convince me. The morality of force-growing clones and presumably rendering them mindless is not considered. The mechanics of making the Whuffie system work as shown aren't really addressed and don't seem fully plausible. The characters are perhaps just a little thin: I couldn't quite get inside Jules, or care that much about his relationship with Lil, for example. (Not to mention minor inconsistencies such as Jules's age—he is just over 100? It seems so, but then how can Lil at 23 be 15% of his age?) But all this is just to say that it's not a perfect book—it's still a fun read, with some nice ideas, and a promising first novel in what could be a significant career.

I quite enjoyed Wil McCarthy's *The Collapsium* a few years back, a generally light-hearted, almost Tom Swifftian, novel set a few centuries hence in the Queencom of Sol. This told of Bruno de Towaji, a great inventor who is called on repeatedly to save the Solar System from destruction, and who finally becomes the permanent consort of the Queen of Sol. There is a lot of wacky tech at the heart of the Queencom: artificial matter such as super-dense collasium, which allows the construction of tiny "planettes" with reasonable gravity; the Fax system, by which people and other objects can be transported as information at light speed, and reassembled at their destination—filters applied to the information in the Fax allow body modifications, most especially elimination of disease and aging; programmable matter, such as

wellstone, which allows ready construction of such things as solar sails by reprogramming reflectivity easily.

The sequel is *The Wellstone* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 2003; \$6.99 pb; 353 pages), set some time later. The Fax filters have led to practical immortality (or immobility), which is a problem for the children. What will they do when they grow up? Their parents aren't about to vacate their jobs, for the most part. Some of these kids turn delinquent as a result—or perhaps they would have been that way in any case. A number of kids are being disciplined by confinement to Camp Friendly, a "summer camp" located on a tiny planet. One of these kids is the POV character, a young engineer named Conrad Mursk. Another is the Crown Prince Bascal, the son of Bruno de Towaji and the Queen. Bascal is extremely talented, a noted poet and a born leader, and he is very rebellious, as well as very spoiled. He incites the boys to an act of sabotage—they escape via Fax to Denver and release a dangerous substance that turns programmable matter to junk. They are soon captured, and Bascal's furious parents return them to Camp Friendly with even stricter confinement (no working Fax gates).

But Bascal is not to be thwarted. With Conrad's sometimes reluctant help, with the help of a semi-accidental recruit, a teenaged girl named Xmary who was arrested by mistake in the earlier incident, and with the continued help of his less intelligent henchmen, Bascal hatches another audacious plot. They use the properties of programmable matter to create a "homemade" solar sailship from the planet, and they head for the nearest working Fax gate. But a surprise awaits them there. . . .

I thought this a better book than *The Collapsium*. It lacks the previous book's almost insouciant inventiveness—the "Tom Swifft" nature I referred to above. But the characters are done better, in particular both Conrad himself and Bascal as seen by Conrad. Bascal is an interesting creation—a nice mixture of admirable and dangerous characteristics. Conrad and Xmary are nicely handled positive characters—their frustration at their lot as children in a world with no room for them as adults is well portrayed. The book remains inventive, and often funny, with a dark undertone, reinforced by a downright grim prologue and epilogue, that lends a certain *gritiness* to the theme.

Some people say that within every fat person there is a thin person struggling to get out. I don't believe that—some people are happy to be large, for some people fat is the right size. Similarly, some fat fantasies are the right size—but it does seem to me that in today's fantasy market, with so much emphasis placed on hefty volumes, inside many fat fantasies there is a thin fantasy struggling to get out. I think that is the case with Terry McGarry's new novel *The Binder's Road* (New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$27.95 hc; 512 pages).

I come to this book somewhat handicapped, not having read its predecessor, *Illumination* (2002). However, I'll say right out that the plot of the current book is self-contained, and as far as I can determine the previous book resolved its plot as well. Thus, the author is playing fair—each book stands alone, at least as to plot. I do suspect, however, that a reader of the first book will have an easier time picking up the details of the setting, and such a reader will also recognize some of the characters. In *Illumination*, an uprising led by the Lightbreaker overthrew the Ennead, rulers of the island Eiden Myr. But, in so doing, all magic was extinguished. Apparently, magic was used to maintain fresh water and fertile crops, and to keep the people free of disease. In some areas of the island, people are working to learn medicine and farming and other such mundane arts. In other areas, refugees are pouring in from now-uninhabitable stretches. And an army has been formed to protect Eiden Myr from potential invaders, as its magical shield is no longer in place.

The Binder's Road is set six years later. It follows a host of viewpoints (obscurely indicated by curious designs at the chapter headings, which it took me quite a while to decipher). One thread follows three sisters, Pelufar, Elota, and Calile, who seem to have mysterious powers—could magic be returning in them? But they must

hide their abilities, because resentment of magicians is very strong. Another thread follows a mysterious jack-of-all-trades named Louarn as he wanders down the island tracking a series of murders of former magicians. Louarn has secrets of his own, though—secrets even from himself. To my mind, those are the main threads, and the book would be better if it concentrated on them. But there are several additional POV characters, and I found that for long stretches the story dragged as it moved to new points of view.

The main thrust of the plot concerns a threat of invasion from offshore and the gathering of resistance to that invasion, hints of magic returning possibly in a different form, and hints of dark plots by some potential surviving members of the Innecad. The general frame of the plot is intriguing and is resolved quite satisfactorily. The magical elements are also quite interesting, particularly the bonefolk, who come and take the organic parts of dead people. And many of the characters are quite engaging. But for too much of the book I was bored, and I am convinced that a sharp redaction in its length would have improved it. (It is, after all, quite long at some 200,000 words.) I suspect that part of the problem may have been a desire to touch on the doings of some characters from *Illuminations*. Though for me it didn't quite work, there is much to like in this book, and readers of fantasy should keep an eye on McGarry's work.

Laurence M. Janifer died last year, some 50 years after publishing his first story. His first novels, in 1959, were collaborations with Randall Garrett (*Pygmalion*, a soft-porn sf novel, and *That Sweet Little Old Lady*, a psi-themed serial for *Armstrong* that earned a Hugo nomination). His best-known stories were about "Gerald Knave, Survivor." The title "survivor" refers to Knave's job: to live on newly opened planets for a while and find out if colonies can survive there. How ever, most of the Knave novels are actually sf mysteries (though the "survivor" aspect does show up in a number of short stories). In the last few years, Janifer placed three Gerald Knave novels with Wildside Press: *The Counterfeit Herdman*, *Alienist*, and now *Twa* (Holicong, Pennsylvania: Wildside Press, 2003; \$15.95 tpb; 187 pages).

Twa is a fairly pleasant story, perhaps the best of the Knave novels.

Knave is newly married and is trying to relax into retirement with his wife. The Crown Princess goes missing, and Knave is recruited to try to figure out what happened. In the process, he finds that people are making attempts on his life and on his wife's life as well. It turns out that more than one fishy thing is going on, involving a humanoid alien species, some homicidal robots, and incompetence in high places. I found it enjoyable light reading, with solutions to a couple of mysteries that were perhaps a bit strained but cute. The ending sets up a potential sixth Knave novel, but I suppose we'll never see that now, unless it is reposing in a trunk somewhere.

Sean McMullen's *Vengeance of the Shadowmoon* (New York: Tor Books 2002; \$27.95 hc; 496 pages) is an uneven, implausible, but quite entertaining science fantasy. As with his previous *Greenwinter* books, it features a large cast of characters, of varying and often ambiguous virtue. It is rather rambling in structure, and it can be difficult to tell the players without a scorecard. It does not really hold together, but it is an enjoyable read.

The novel opens with an ambitious emperor, Warsovran, denouncing a terrible magical device called Silverdeath over a city that has been resisting his siege. We soon learn that Silverdeath also has the property of rejuvenating its wearer, in this case Warsovran. We also soon learn that left unchecked Silverdeath will destroy the world.

The novel meanders for quite some time, as an array of characters oppose the ambitions of Warsovran. A multitude of characters are introduced, most of whom seem to be deposed kings, queens, and princesses in hiding. Some who seem to be heroes turn out to be villains, but there are a few people we can root for throughout. McMullen's magical concepts are interesting, and some of his tricks in this regard are quite nice. The more conventional maneuverings of the plot do hold the interest, but they don't always convince—the plot turns on implausible abilities of its characters, implausible military scenes, and a somewhat disappointing climax. On balance, it's a minor but fairly fun book. ▶

Rash Horton lives in Webster Grove, Missouri.

A Just Determination by John G. Henry

New York: Ace Books, 2003; \$6.50 pb; 259 pages

reviewed by David Mead

With *A Just Determination*, John Henry—author of a series of near-future military sf novels featuring Sergeant Ethan Stark—focuses on the US Navy in space, starting a newly minted graduate of the US Naval Academy at Annapolis, Ensign Paul Sinclair. I need to ask my friend Carl (a real academy grad) what the Navy calls officers who clearly have "the right stuff," because both author Henry and Ensign Sinclair have it.

The title of this novel comes from *The Manual of Courts Martial*, United States, and legal proceedings of various kinds are central to the story, but this is definitely not JAG-in-Space. Ensign Sinclair, newly commissioned and detailed to the USS *Michelson*, a space cruiser with a crew of 200, is made ship's legal officer—as a collateral duty—because he had the misfortune to be sent to a one-month law course while waiting for assignment. This accident of fate puts him at the center of events when Captain Peter Wakeman, commander of the USS *Michelson*, makes a terrible command decision for which he is court-martialed. Sinclair has to decide whether to testify for the prosecution, or to obey his conscience and his understanding of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and speak for Wakeman's defense, risking his budding career in the Navy.

The events of *A Just Determination* take place a century or two in the future. Henry has been careful to make the history of this future indefinite and undated, although it is sufficiently like our own to be readily recognizable. In this future, the nations and alliances of Earth have extended themselves into Solar space, establishing not only space stations and orbital habitats but also planetary colonies and military bases as far distant as Ceres. These polities have taken with them a greedy colonialism, extending their nationalistic claims to vast regions

of space. In order to validate their claims to these volumes, and the valuable trade routes and trajectories they contain, the various Earthly powers—including the United States and the South Asian Alliance—must demonstrate their control by active military patrolling. The *Michelson* is a patrol craft, assigned to assert the claim of the United States to one of these regions by cruising for long periods of time, waiting to repel any unauthorized incursions by the spaceships of other nations. The *Michelson*'s captain is an incompetent careerist who yearns for a landside staff position where he can butter up admirals; all that matters to him is "looking good." Fortunately for Captain Wakeman, the *Michelson* has a good executive officer and officer cadre. They keep him looking good despite himself. Unfortunately for Wakeman, a spacecraft of the South Asian Alliance tries to pass through the US zone, giving him an excuse to show off to Fleet. Not content to chase the South Asian Alliance interloper away, Wakeman decides to pursue, and then attack, this enemy vessel, which turns out to be an unarmed research ship behaving in an apparently threatening way. His actions may or may not be lawful or consistent with his orders; a court martial will decide, and Ensign Sinclair's testimony will be crucial.

Paul Sinclair is an amiable, somewhat uncertain fellow, who, like us, has to find his way in a strange environment. Stealthed and heavily armed, the "Mad Mike" is a submarine-like craft, packed tight with a believable mix of careerists, idealists, hotdogs, and time-serving incompetents. As the most junior officer, Sinclair has to learn his way around the ship, do his multitude of duties well, and deal with the many new faces and personalities that are shaping his life.

Henry's narrative is deceptively smooth. The story unfolds very

easily, with a minimum of scene-setting, irrelevant description, or background. There's very little explanation of the socio-political milieu in which Paul lives and the *Michelson* operates, and not much is said about any of the characters' prior lives, homes, families, etc. Yet as we read, we don't really feel the absence of this information, since most of Paul's time is spent dealing with immediate events and tasks. The details of military life and the justice system that are explained are fascinating, vital to the story, and smoothly integrated into it. I expect that more details of this future and the lives of Paul and his friends will reveal themselves at an appropriate moment, although I doubt that Henry will ever explore the relation of the military to politics the way, say, David Weber's Honor Harrington novels do.

The basic story is a *Bildungsroman*, or the first part of one, initiating the narrative of Paul Sinclair's development from a competent but inexperienced young officer to... but who knows what adventures Henry will provide in the future? This is surely just the beginning of a series of novels, since by the end of this story Paul

Sinclair has shown himself (to his colleagues and to the fleet) to be an officer of real promise, built a network of friends and admirers, and developed a serious, on-going romance with Ensign Jen Chen, a fellow officer who has been reassigned to another patrol cruiser. There is no sense of closure to Sinclair's story, and everything is ready for a sequel, although there's no indication in the text that a sequel is forthcoming.

I was afraid, when I began reading this story, that it would be another heroic Horatio-Hornblower-in-Space adventure, like the Nicholas Seafort novels of David Feintuch, but *A Just Determination* turns out to be a very interesting story with believable characters and a strong moral. One can believe that the US Navy of the future might indeed operate this way in space (I was particularly impressed by the very plausible handling of gender issues). It also lays the groundwork for a series which I am looking forward to reading. I recommend it heartily. ▶

David Mead lives in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Letters from Hades by Jeffrey Thomas

Orlando, FL: Necro/Bedlam Press, 2003; \$45.00 hc/\$14.95 tpb; 204 pages
reviewed by Walter Minkel

Our anonymous narrator, the author of this diary written in Hell, was a 33-year-old Massachusetts man who blasted off most of his own head with a shotgun for what he thought were some pretty good reasons. "I wanted to be a writer," he tells a woman he meets there as they travel to the city of Oblivion. "Great American novelist. And it wasn't going to work. . . . I was working a job I hated for money that wouldn't cover my bills. And my wife fell in love with a co-worker. Had an affair with him. Left me for him. . . ." He and his wife were childless, and she had had a miscarriage a year earlier, losing a baby they had both wanted very much.

Other people have killed themselves for less reason. And the narrator was an agnostic; he saw no reason to believe in a deity, and he knew there wasn't going to be any kind of afterlife. Pick up that shotgun, pull the trigger, it would all be over in a nanosecond, and then he'd have an eternity of peaceful oblivion, right?

Oops, sorry; no. When he wakes up, bloody and naked, on a dirty tile floor in Hell with a drain in it, our narrator soon learns that the worst images of Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson, and the other evangelical preachers are true. Not only are Heaven and Hell real places, but the Father himself (as those in the afterlife refer to the deity) condemned all who did not believe in the godhood of his Son. No matter how badly your body was ravaged in death, it heals rapidly as soon as you arrive in Hell, just in time to be jerked over to a hideous Demon with a branding iron who marks you with your failing in the Father's eyes. Our narrator is branded with an "A" (he's never sure whether that means "agnostic," "atheist," or both—his beliefs are, it appears, more important to the Father than the fact that he is a suicide). Jews and Muslims are branded "J" and "M" for all eternity for not accepting the Son as the Lord. Nor is there such a place as Purgatory or Limbo; you get your chance in life, our narrator learns, to accept the Son. If you don't do it then, you're damned for all time. And across the vastness of Hell, none of the Damned are able to locate departed friends or family members they knew in life. It's a world of strangers. The Damned, like our narrator, don't need to eat and sleep, but they still get hungry and tired. They long to know what has happened to the friends and family members they left behind in the mortal world but will, it seems, never find out. Our narrator keeps his diary in the only place he can—a notebook found in the skin of an author who wrote something the Father found offensive, with one of that author's eyes set, alive and blinking, in the center of the front cover. It is one of the Damned, transformed in one of Hell's torture plants.

And there's much more, even worse. The Angels—those who did believe, and whom the Father made citizens of Heaven—come down to Hell, armed with everything from swords to submachine guns to hunt, for fun, the Damned and the Demons who torment them. If they

blow the head off one of the Damned, that's okay—the body will grow back in a day or two, and the torment can be repeated. The Angels are a bunch of good old boys, who dress in white robes with very familiar pointed hoods.

If you're like our narrator, college educated and fairly liberal politically, it does sound like Hell—a Hell in which God is more conservative than George W. Bush. But this story isn't only a one-note joke; our narrator spends a lot of the book, especially near the beginning, meditating on his situation, and the story is speckled with small twists and theological surprises. Is it possible that, alive and aware as he is—even if in an artificial or spiritual body that keeps healing itself relentlessly—he can change his situation, or at least fight to change it? Soon after he learns that there is no Satan—that the Father, the Creator, is the boss of both Heaven and Hell—it's revealed that the Demons, and the "Celestials" who accompany the Angels, are soulless creations of the Father and can be killed; however, his own miserable existence will never end. "It isn't fair," he says to Caroline, the Damned woman with whom he strikes up a temporary friendship. "Fairness is a human invention," Caroline replies before she abandons him.

The rest of this short novel's plot is rather like the tongue-in-cheek story of an American *artiste* involved in a romance of an endless French Resistance—or narrator rescues a beautiful female Demon from crucifixion and later is caught up with her in a battle on the always-traveling Black Cathedral. When our narrator rescues the demon Chara, he recognizes that a big reason he's doing it is because she's a babe despite her burrows and black blood. He writes with a self-directed sneer, "I actually felt ashamed for objectifying a female Demon. Political correctness in Hell."

The book also includes 30 black-and-white scratchboard illustrations by Erik Wilson, which were not present in the galley, though a few samples are on the publisher's web site www.necropublications.com/ntitles/lfh.htm. Jeffrey Thomas has also created the short-story cycle *Punktown* (Ministry of Whimsy Press, 2000), a grimy mix of sf, fantasy, and horror that won him a lot of critical praise. His stories have also been reprinted in numerous horror anthologies, and *Letters from Hades* includes "Coffee Break," the short story published in 1992 in the *Strange Days #4* anthology that inspired the full-length version. There are significant differences between the story and the novel, and comparing them is an appealing lesson in the way a writer's ideas evolve from a small format to a larger one.

I found *Letters* thoroughly enjoyable and convoluted, and much more than the B-movie it could have become. ▶

Walter Minkel lives in Forest Hills, New York.

The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations, edited by Darrell Schweitzer

Hollicong, PA: Wildside Press, 2003; \$19.95 tpb; 188 pages

reviewed by Greg Beatty

I opened *The Thomas Ligotti Reader* in a decidedly conflicted mood. On one hand, Thomas Ligotti is a stunningly good writer. He is, as several of the writers in this collection note, the greatest living writer of weird fiction, arguably the best writer of the somewhat different but overlapping category of horror fiction, and one of the finest prose stylists working in genre fiction today.

Ligotti's work deserves more recognition, so in one sense, as Darrell Schweitzer's introduction notes, this book feels overdue. On the other hand, more than other, more accessible writers of weird/horror fiction (just about everyone), Ligotti's work will benefit from a book like this. His stories are densely written and at times quite challenging, and the combination of intense emotion, deep learning, and reflection Ligotti mobilizes in his fiction is frankly daunting. However, because of this, and because of the uniqueness of Ligotti's literary voice, when I opened this book I feared simplification or obfuscation. It seemed simply too easy for people to get Ligotti wrong.

I am happy to report that my fears were unfounded. While *The Thomas Ligotti Reader* isn't perfect (more on the weaknesses later), and is almost as idiosyncratic as Ligotti's fiction, I recommend it without hesitation. Anyone who is interested in Ligotti, weird or horror fiction, and larger cultural issues of alienation, the fantastic, and contemporary reflections on the nature of personal and ontological reality will find something to enjoy in this collection. Pick it up with *The Nightmare Factory*, a mammoth collection of Ligotti's short fiction, and settle in to explore a complex dreamscape.

Now, on to specifics; what precisely does *The Thomas Ligotti Reader* contain? For once, the subtitle is accurate; the collection contains both essays and explorations. In addition to Darrell Schweitzer's introduction, there are thirteen pieces: a bibliography, two interviews with Ligotti, and one essay by him on the nature of horror, with the rest of the collection being essays focusing on various aspects of his career (many of them reprints). Because there are multiple authors, there is some repetition (reviews of how Ligotti's career rose through the small press, for example), but Ligotti's career is rich enough that this repetition is minimal. Indeed, the remaining nine essays cover quite an admirable range of topics, but leave a number of questions and topics relatively untouched.

Schweitzer's introduction opens a question that returns throughout the collection, of just why Thomas Ligotti is as important (and as good) as he is. It also strikes a tone that several others in the collection take up, that of the enthusiastic convert. In the second of the two interviews contained in the reader, Ligotti suggests that he will never be widely popular because he is not interested in the same things as the common reader. This is an acute and, I believe, an accurate statement, but the converse seems to be that when Ligotti speaks to someone, the effect is transformational, a kind of "I never thought that anyone could see things the way that I do and express them so well!"

This mix of recognition and wonder emerges most intriguingly in David Tibet's brief personal essay "Soft Black Star: Some Thoughts on Knowing Thomas Ligotti." Tibet is a musician working in the English post-Industrial scene, the history of which is expertly explained in William Burns's "Twilight Twilight Nihil Nihil." He is, however, clearly an artist in the British tradition, capable of making connections among a range of cultural traditions that are interesting in themselves, but that also illuminate Ligotti. He opens his reflection on knowing Ligotti by linking the song "Darkness, Darkness" with M. R. James, and then building forward to Thomas Ligotti and the distinctions between Ligotti and his precursors in the fantastic.

But Tibet is not just a reader or fan (though the hundreds of letters he mentions having exchanged with Ligotti indicate just how much of a fan he is), he is also a musician, part of the group Current 93. Tibet built on his interest in Ligotti's work by collaborating with him. A later essay, Ben P. Indick's "The Dream Quest of Thomas Ligotti: A Study of *In a Foreign Town*, in *A Foreign Land*," discusses the interaction between Ligotti's prose in *In a Foreign Town*, in *A Foreign Land* and the album Current 93 put together to accompany

it. Indick's essay is intriguing, as he attempts to capture and explain the relationship between the two, but it is more successful in evoking interest, rather than giving a real sense of how sound and word interact. On the other hand, Burns's essay, mentioned above, does a fine job of sketching the philosophical links between Ligotti's written work, and this musical movement, and why they might interact.

Tibet's own essay doesn't discuss the collaborative process much, focusing instead on what it's been like to know Ligotti. This is more of a bonus than it might be for other writers, because almost no one has met Ligotti in person. Instead, like H. P. Lovecraft, with whom he is often rightly compared, and whom he credits as a major influence on his prose, to an even greater extent, Ligotti communicates with his peers actively, but primarily at a distance, via letters, e-mails, and interviews. The result is a kind of mystery that fits well with the dubious, dreamy feel of Ligotti's fiction, a sense that Ligotti is at once strange, very well and not at all. It left me, for one, clutching at the small strange details that Tibet shared. Ligotti likes The Moody Blues? Okay, sure. And Yes? I can see that. But Emerson Lake and Palmer? Like the protagonist of many a Ligotti story, I feel like I've been given a sign, if only I knew how to read it.

Figuring out how to read Ligotti, and what it means to do so, is the focus of the remaining pieces in the collection, and, though some are more useful than others, I must repeat my happiness at noting that all are useful; each contributes at least one key element for understanding Ligotti. Robert Price's "The Mystagogue, the Gnostic Quest, the Secret Book" traces the prevalence of these themes throughout the whole of Ligotti's career, arguing that all of Ligotti's fiction shares a unified world view, one in which humanity is defined by our shared delusions and mystagogues regularly search the secrets behind these delusions, only to find that they are implicated in the collective deception, so that all revelation is self-revelation.

Given such a world view, it is no surprise that, as Stefan R.

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Dzemanowicz argues in "Nothing Is What It Seems," doubt is a major factor in Ligotti's fiction, both as a mechanism and as an end in itself. Dzemanowicz suggests that Ligotti's stories emerge out of the relationship between aspects of the normal and its opposite.

Needless to say, a pattern is emerging here, in which critics note the presence of binary oppositions in Ligotti's work—giving them different names according to their aims—but oppositions that defy simple classification because they interact in such a way as to define one another. This interaction is given its best analysis in Matt Cardin's "Liminal Beauty and Collective Identity in Thomas Ligotti's 'The Shadow at the Bottom of the World.'" Most of the essays earlier in the collection had done close readings of Ligotti's work, augmented by a modest amount of literary history, such as linking Ligotti to his self-proclaimed precursors in the weird fiction tradition: Lovecraft, Poe, Blackwood, Machen. Cardin's essay goes beyond this, adapting the idea of the liminal space from anthropological theory to an analysis of a single Ligotti story. This works exceptionally well when he combines it with an analysis of Ligotti's syntax, noting the implications of writing in the first person plural ("we"). While I might argue with a few of Cardin's smaller assertions, his larger argument about how Ligotti makes his fiction disturbing on an ontological basis is both convincing and illuminating.

Cardin does something similar in "The Transition from Literary Horror to Existential Horror in Thomas Ligotti's 'Netherscurial,'" in which he argues that the framing structures Ligotti uses in the story are essential not just in communicating a sense of the transcendent disturbances experienced by the characters in the story, but also in creating a similar sense of dis-ease for the reader. This explanation goes a long way toward explaining both Ligotti's success as a writer of weird fiction, and his lack of a more general recognition: relatively few readers really want to feel their worlds disturbed.

The last essay in the collection, S. T. Joshi's "Thomas Ligotti: Escape from Life," provides the best overview and evaluation of Ligotti's career to date. Joshi is the perfect person to do this. A leading Lovecraft scholar, Joshi has long been a champion of weird fiction, and

has an encyclopedic knowledge of the tradition. Indeed, this essay appeared in *The Modern Weird Tale*. However, it works better here, pulling the collection together and giving it a needed unity before it closes with Douglas Anderson's bibliography. Like Cardin, Joshi discusses Ligotti's "Netherscurial," but rather than focusing on that story alone, he traces the connection between it and Lovecraft's story "The Call of Cthulhu," using the comparison as a bridge to place Ligotti in weird fiction. As he does, Joshi analyzes the dreamlike texture of Ligotti's fiction. Joshi is also one of the few critics in this collection to judge which of Ligotti's stories are superior, and which are weakened by Ligotti's overindulgence in lush prose and intellectualization.

So, if there are so many strengths in this collection, what are the weaknesses? There are three primary weaknesses. The first is the failure to integrate Ligotti's biography with his fiction. In his essay "Ligotti's Corporate Horror," Darrell Schweitzer makes a cogent observation about the parallels between Ligotti's panic attacks, the linguistic roots of "agoraphobia" (fear of the marketplace), and the corporate despair Ligotti captures in his recent work. However, no one follows up on this observation, and no one examines the biographical elements that Ligotti himself has said influenced his writing (an early surgery, his Catholic upbringing). Second, there is a comparative lack of structural analysis. In one of the interviews Ligotti mentions how carefully plotted his work is, but only Cardin and Joshi really address plot structures. Third, and most importantly, there is a lack of larger context. Several writers intelligently explain Ligotti's relationship to Lovecraft and Poe, but no one delves into the relationship between Ligotti and other nongenre writers he cites as influences, such as Nabokov and Bruno Schulz.

However, these lacunae do not detract from the very real value of *The Thomas Ligotti Reader*. What it does, it does well, and one can only hope that this collection brings Ligotti's dark genius more of the attention it so richly deserves. ►

Greg Beatty lives in Bellingham, Washington.

(Photos continued from page 3)



James Morrow at Confluence in Pittsburgh, PA.



Deborah Layton & Lucius Shepard talking in Austin.



Greg Ketter contrasts with John Douglas at Armadillocon.



Howard Waldrop and Jennifer Hall (Austin).



Joe Lansdale mans his table in the Armadillocon Dealers' Room.

Loose Canon by Charles Platt

Hollicong, PA: Cosmos Books, 2003; \$40.00 hb/\$19.95 tpb; 228 pages

reviewed by John Clute

We may start with the problem of the title, which is a misnomer. Anyone who has known Charles Platt personally will agree that Bruce Sterling's description of him as a "loose cannon" does ring a bell, but a bell whose pitch is not quite perfect. Over the past 40 years or so, Charles may have always been capable of *mispriting* the targets of his jokes and lapes, but I think no one, not even his greatest enemy (and there is a list to choose from), could ever conceive that Charles failed to take aim. And just as there is nothing scattershot about the conviction entity that is Charles Platt in the flesh, there is likewise nothing random about his written work. Right or wrong, Platt has always known exactly what he was saying (not an entirely common faculty of mind); and what he has been saying, again and again, about science fiction amounts to a single, sustained, narrow, poignant argument that the sf which mattered, the First SF of rational transcendence he discovered as a very young man and nailed himself to, has gone; that sf is dead. The collection on review, which assembles criticism and associated texts from the early 1980s into the heat death of the 1990s, is not a *Loose Canon*. It is an array of rifles, aimed directly at anyone who hopes to think that there is anything to do with the sf of century-end but leave it, mourn, and shut the door.

Loose Canon is a kind of intellectual autobiography of disillusion, though one not, perhaps, ideally devised to trace Platt's slow but undeviating Pilgrim's Progress towards departure. It would have perhaps been more telling for the 34 pieces here assembled to have been arranged in chronological order, rather than into the six thematically arranged divisions of the actual book: "Looking Back," "Lamenting the Literature," "The Writers," "The Business," "Behind the Business," and "Looking Forward." Re-sorted into a chronicle of departure, the 34 essays and reviews—most of them originally published in *Interzone* and *Science Fiction Eye*, and others in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *The Fantasy Review*, *Cheap Truth*, and elsewhere—would compose a *Symphony of Tonight* Werther whose lost love, whether or not a signifier of the imagination, does continue to stir the heart.

Which is not to say that the belatedness of *Loose Canon* is entirely winning, nor that Platt's terrorizing cogency does not now, in some cases, after a decade or so, seem just a little *crass*. Nor do his judgments of particular authors always wear well; it may have been bringingly iconoclastic in 1989 to value Victor Koman more highly than Ursula K. Le Guin, juxtaposing his extreme libertarianism—politicians "are committed to theft, rape, plunder, and murder—the four functions of the State—and therefore the person who exclusively assassinates agents of government is behaving morally"—against the treacherous moo of "Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight." But Le Guin is copious and continuing, and no one story sums her up; while Koman stops, more or less, at *The Jehovah Contract* (1985). And as it is with his judgments upon writers (too few of them are collected here; Platt remains a startlingly *present* reader of texts), so it is with his take on the death of the old sf.

Platt began his professional career within the ambit of Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* in the mid 1960s, whose influence he now deplures, or did when he wrote "The Carnival of Anger" in 1994, wherein he says American traditionalists were correct when they attacked the New Wave "as a threat to the secret principles that were the very foundation of science fiction." Those secret principles are not perhaps entirely easy to assert; but central to Platt's vision of sf is the argument that,

Unlike any other form of fiction, it is *rationaly transcendent*.

In other words, it shows us alternate worlds that are not just internally consistent, but externally consistent and potentially accessible from the world where we live today.

It is not controversial, even now, to claim that genuine sf should present worlds which are arguable. What gives pause are the outliers Platt attaches to this platform—that the task of sf is to provide heuristic models for potential scientific/technological innovations, within a

frame of understanding that does not ultimately question the need to apply such models to the world; that sf is therefore a set of instruction kits for toolboxes that will fix the world; and that, because there can be no real questioning the value of these interventions, other kinds of sf are *morally* suspect:

From the sunny perspective of, say, California, a writer such as M. John Harrison seems quite perverse in his preoccupation with death, deformity, and doom.

Twenty years ago, before I emigrated from London to New York, I angrily denied the "nihilism" either as it was then applied to stories that appeared in *New Worlds* magazine. Being British by upbringing, I have a personal weakness for morbid stories, and have even written a few myself. But it is a weakness; because I think the real business of science fiction should be the realistic depiction of people overcoming, rather than surrendering to, forces that are greater than themselves. ("Destination: Gloom," 1988)

There can be no question that, in these pieces, Platt expresses a view of twentieth century sf with unparalleled clarity. And in the end, it may not deeply matter that his understanding of sf had a purity no single ur-text could possibly live up to, though it matters rather more, for those who care personally for Charles, that the inevitable failures of his search for joy through transcendence manuals clearly caused him, as several of the essays here assembled manifest, personal discomfort, even anguish. It is perhaps as well that he left sf—as a profession and as a target of intellectual concern—some years ago, because the sf of 2003, as far as fixing the world is concerned, has become humble. Or, as in modern space opera, it has occupied a new arena. SF in 2003 has become dances to a different drummer.

Charles Platt himself, after a digressive immersion in cynicism, continues to live as free as folk can live upon this planet. In a western state of America, *Loose Canon* may be a cannonade of farewell, and its constituent parts may be buried fathoms deep in the wake of century-end, but its contents seem so fresh and smokeless from the high burn of the honesty of the man that it is yet possible, somehow, to imagine a cold disavowal eye still glaring out of the West, unblinking, very much alive, seeking us out to scathe. ▶

John Clute lives in London, England.

(Editorial continued from page 24)

look at more examples, look for more evidence, and modify your arguments accordingly. And argue most about things that matter to grown-ups. Have the kind of serious conversations about art and life that you thought grown-ups could have when you were a child, but so seldom have.

And before I end this editorial, I'd like to repeat one of our old saws. Anyone who tells you that this year's books are better than last year's books is almost certainly a liar or a publicist. A few of the books may be better, but in many years even that is not so. So, you should ideally always read an older book of good reputation for every new book you read. Even if it is an older *Solar Trek* novel, you may well be doing yourself a real favor. And who among us has no older books around waiting to be read? The complete works of Robert A. Heinlein, or Philip K. Dick, or Ursula K. Le Guin, or Theodore Sturgeon, or Gene Wolfe, or Connie Willis, await you.

And another year of *NTRSF* awaits you, too. We have a restless urge to break even, so send in your renewals.

—David G. Hartwell
& the editors

Sweet Sixteen

By the time you read this, the fifteenth anniversary reunion of *NTRSF* will be over and you can see some pictures elsewhere in the magazine. We are all older, and presumably wiser, now but the ideas behind this magazine still seem worthwhile and a necessary contribution to the sf field—which we still interpret in the traditional broad-church fashion to be an umbrella for fantasy and horror as well, in spite of their real if fluid genre distinctions. We are forever striving toward improvement, toward longer, richer, deeper, more thoughtful reviews that consider not only the strengths and weaknesses of good books, but also the context of the work in the body of the writer's own work, in the body of other current works, and in the whole tradition of such works in the field. And we also bring you essays, from the personal to the academic, from the appreciative to the critical. We seek to be a bridge between the fan community, with its concerns for the living literature, and the academic community, with its specialized and sometimes technical concerns and techniques. Much of contemporary literature has fallen nearly entirely into the hands of academics for evaluation, and we see that as undesirable, particularly for sf. We have always held the opinion that genres cohere and proceed by interaction among the writers and the audience; that not only is there an on-going conversation among genre texts, but among the writers, who see and speak to and argue with one another, and among the readers, who also see and speak to and argue (constantly) with one another and with the writers.

One of the hallmarks of a *NTRSF* work weekend, other than unanticipated problems or disasters (in a new twist on an old problem, lightning struck at 4:41 A.M. and blew out our cable modem connection today), is vigorous discussion, and argument, among staff members over genre and literary matters.

That and gossip, of course. Ironically, the best gossip this weekend was in my family, not sf: my nephew Chris Chin, who lives with his family and my mother in Duxbury, Massachusetts, was a close witness, to the woman who gave birth silently, standing up, on the commuter train to Boston last Wednesday A.M. Many of you will have noticed this colorful story; Chris was interviewed in the Boston Globe [July 31, "Refusing help, woman gives birth aboard T"] and elsewhere. "I saw a head, then full baby fall out from her skirt, hit the floor sideways and slide the length of the doorway, stopping when he bumped up against the next row of seats. Still she stared out the window.")

But back to argument, by which we mean informed disagreement and debate. In the last month, we have been to Readercon and, two weeks later, to Confluence, which are both conventions oriented toward serious discussion of timely or controversial topics. We noticed years ago that part of the impact of *NTRSF* was on convention programming, that issues raised in our editorials, essays, letters, and reviews often become panel topics. I think I can say that everyone who has ever been on the *NTRSF* staff is willing and eager to discuss and disagree about sf. Sometimes this is subsidiary to a willingness to relate to others by disagreeing about any available topic. But oh, the talk goes on into the night and begins again the next morning.

Who has evidence? Who can cite examples or counter-examples? Who is generalizing based on too little reading, or the wrong examples? Who will go off and read, to continue the argument better the next time? Our attitude is. Always

(Continued on page 23)

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